

ESSAYS ON SHAKESPEARE
AND HIS WORKS

EDITED BY
SIR SPENSER ST. JOHN

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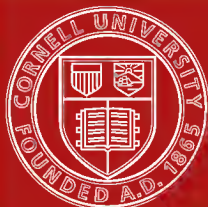
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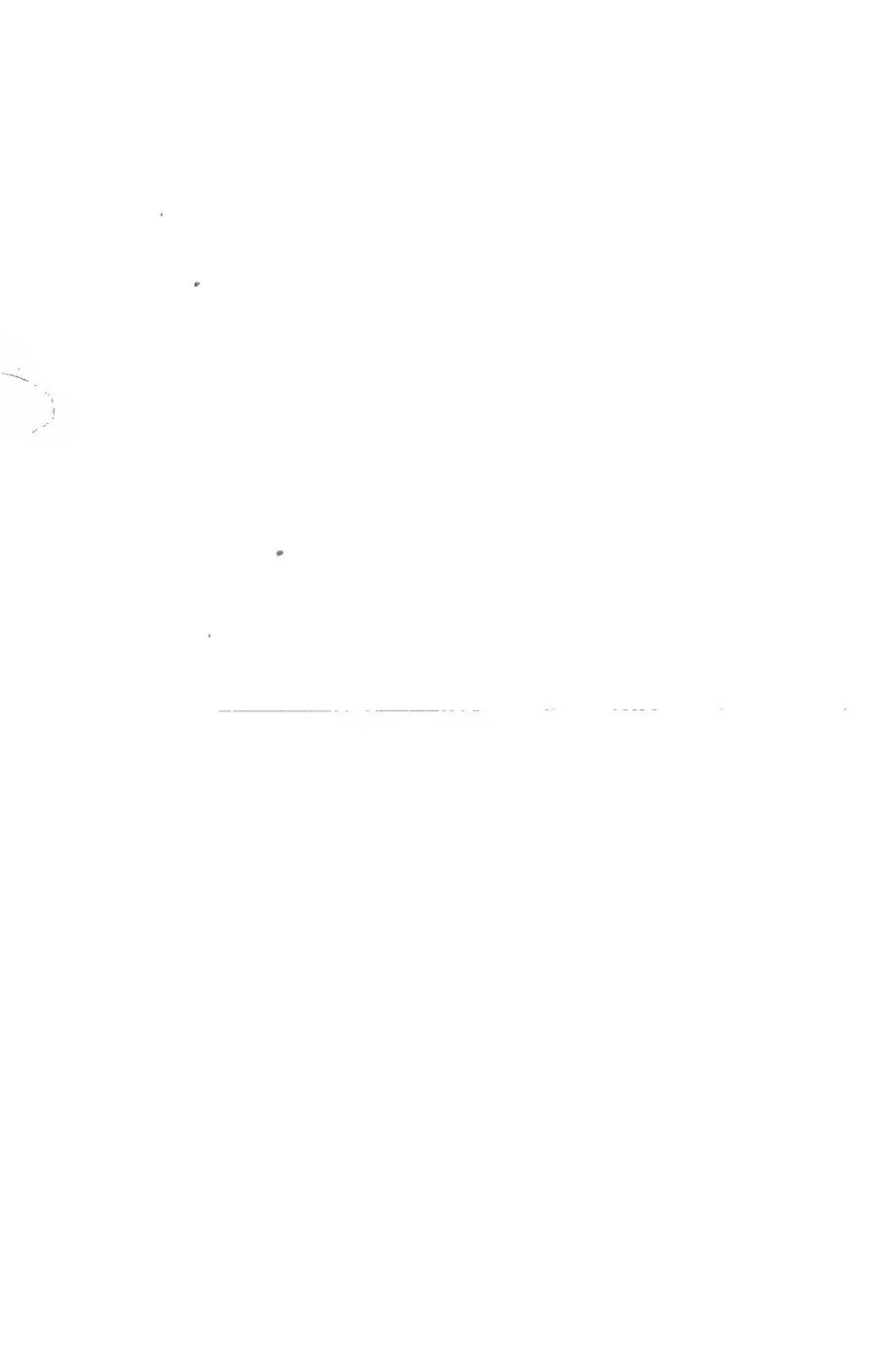
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ON
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EDITED BY
SIR SPENSER ST. JOHN, G.C.M.G.
OF H.M.'S DIPLOMATIC SERVICE (RETIRED)

*FROM THE MSS. AND NOTES OF
A DECEASED RELATIVE*

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PREFACE

THE Essays contained in this volume I am editing are almost entirely founded on the MSS. and notes of a deceased relative. They are the work of an author of culture, of high classical attainments, a traveller and a man of the world. They do not profess to be more than their name implies: a criticism of Shakespeare and his works, and not of the drama of the Elizabethan era; nor do they endeavour to compete with the writings of the learned and able men who in these days have devoted themselves to the study of our greatest poet. Before the Public Service took me away to the wildest of foreign lands, I was myself an ardent student of Shakespeare, and therefore I was indeed deeply interested when I read these Essays, which in general accorded so completely with my views, though in minor points I occasionally hesitated to accept them. They came into my hands in a very disordered state, and I fear that although I have taken great pains in arranging them they are still not as presentable as I had hoped.

Perhaps the general reader may think as I do that he would rather be aided by the opinions and criticisms

of one really capable man, than be puzzled by the opinions of half a dozen critics however able. Taken as a whole these Essays may, I believe, be looked upon as a true and faithful analysis of the plays of our greatest dramatist: they are not eulogies, but they endeavour to present to the reader the faults as well as the beauties of these noble plays.

A few of the Essays are not quite complete, as, for instance, the one entitled 'Plot and Story,' but I have not liked to omit it. There are also occasionally slight repetitions, but as they appeared necessary to the full understanding of the argument I have not suppressed them.

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ESSAYS ON SHAKESPEARE

ESSAY I

INTRODUCTORY

IN expressing our opinions of a great author we are beset by some difficulties not necessarily inherent in the subject itself. A theory of the man and of his writings having been framed by criticism, and adopted by the public, every new speculation is expected to fall within the limits of that theory and to be throughout in harmony with it. The newness consequently must consist rather in fresh discoveries of excellences, in forms of praise, in outbursts of admiration, in idolatry, more or less mitigated, than in an impartial investigation into the genuine nature of his productions.

Though Shakespeare is not and cannot be to us, what Homer was to the Greeks, the source of religion, philosophy, and politics, he embodies so large a portion of the national consciousness that he will probably be our most cherished intellectual companion as long as we continue to form a nation. Yet he must be differently estimated by each succeeding age according to the measure of its culture and intelligence. He is not to us what he was to the contemporaries of Raleigh and Bacon, of Addison and Pope, of

Gibbon and Johnson ; all these had their pedantries and their prejudices, in literature, in theology, and in ethics, which modified their admiration and gave a colour to their criticism. We also have our prejudices and our pedantries, which we can no more shake off than we can think in Chinese.

Of certain books which were once to be found on the shelves of every library Johnson observes that it is easier to praise than to read them. Many critics find dispraise no less easy, especially when engaged in heaping up adulation on some favourite author, whom they seek to elevate at the expense of every other individual who can by any contrivance be forced into comparison with him.

Shakespeare, who has excellences lying in the foreground as well as in the obscure distance, has seldom, as it appears to me, been subjected to useful criticism. Was he lawyer's clerk, was he schoolmaster, was he a woolstapler, was he a butcher, was he poor, did he hold gentlemen's horses at the door of the theatre, was he rich—either through the results of his own industry or by the generosity of certain noblemen? Inquiries without end have been entered into on these comparatively trivial questions. But did he write the plays attributed to him, and, if so, what is the value of those plays to us of the present generation and to posterity? If he wrote all or most of the dramas usually found in the collected editions of his works, together with certain poems and sonnets, it may be worth while to examine once more such of them as appear to be his, and to ascertain if possible the amount of merit to be found in them, or, if there be demerit, to point it out and justify the decision. More good may be effected in this way than

by piling up eulogies which often prove nothing more than that their authors wanted discrimination, and were determined that the world should know it.

It was no fault of Shakespeare's certainly, but he has been the occasion of more nonsense than almost any other writer, either ancient or modern. Aristotle indeed had ten thousand commentators, who, as Swift suggests, knew as little of him as he did of them.

From the date of Rowe's edition, 1709, down to the publication of Malone's 'Shakespeare' by Boswell in 1821 there appeared numerous elaborate editions, accompanied by a formidable array of notes and prefaced for the most part with extravagant eulogies. The eighteenth century may in fact be regarded as a Shakespeare era, the very perihelion of the poet's fame, during which many able critics sought to outdo each other in the servility of their admiration. Rowe, indeed, confines his praise within modest limits; sometimes underrating the merits of Shakespeare, as where he tells us that the parasite and the vain-glorious in *Parolles* is as good as anything of that kind in *Plautus* or *Terence*. What he says of Shakespeare's treatment of the supernatural is well expressed: 'The greatness of this author's genius does nowhere so much appear as where he gives his imagination an entire loose, and raises his fancy to a flight above mankind and the limits of the visible world.'

When Pope nineteen years later undertook to point out Shakespeare's great qualities he exhibited as little regard for truth as he did for his own reputation. His knowledge of antiquity, notwithstanding his Homeric studies, was very limited, though he desired to be thought a great proficient in that kind of learning.

‘If ever any author,’ he says, ‘deserved the name of an original, it was Shakespeare. Homer himself drew not his art so immediately from the fountains of nature; it proceeded through Egyptian strainers and channels, and came to him not without some tincture of the learning or some cast of the models of those before him.’

Mr. Gladstone in his learned and admirable picture of the Homeric age, and of the ages immediately preceding it, is at some pains to show that the belief in the Unity of God reached Hellas from the East; but he knows nothing of those ‘strainers and channels’ through which Pope imagines Homer to have derived his knowledge of the poetical art. The Arabs of Tyre and Sidon no doubt imported some knowledge with their merchandise into Greece and other European countries, but the Greeks knew too little of Arabic, and the Arabs of Greek, to render the transmission of poetic ideas and refinement possible. Pope proceeds: ‘The poetry of Shakespeare was inspiration indeed: he is not so much an imitator as an instrument of Nature, and it is not so just to say that he speaks from her, as that she speaks through him.’ As Pope has made himself an object of admiration to us by many of his own writings, and still more by his translation of Homer, it is a matter of regret that he should have put forward so many erroneous opinions respecting Shakespeare, whom he really understood less than many writers inferior in other respects to him. Possessed by a sort of mania for saying striking things, he lost sight of truth, and, as his authority in literature was very great, may be said to have set the fashion of elevating Shakespeare into an object of idolatry. His aim was, however, much less to eulogise

Shakespeare than to shine himself, which may be affirmed with equal truth of his friend Warburton, one of the ablest and most unamiable men who have written on Shakespeare. Each succeeding editor, with the exception of Steevens, seems to have looked upon it as a religious duty to exceed all his predecessors in the force and fervour of devotion, which may be said to have culminated in the phrase: 'He came out of Nature's hand, like Pallas out of Jove's head, at full growth and mature.' In this style critics went on to the time of Coleridge, who closed the list of able writers of the apotheotic class. Exaggeration could be carried no further; the public grew weary of idolising Shakespeare, though writers of mean intellect, urged by some instinct, in spite of Nature and their stars, to write, go on still harping on the same string. It is time, however, to have done with adulation and yield to the influence of truth. But whither will this lead us? Not certainly to disparage Shakespeare, but to hold up, if possible, such a mirror as shall reflect faithfully both the man and his writings. There is nothing to be gained by considering him worse or better than he is, truer or less true to nature, completer or less complete in his art, wiser or less wise in his philosophy. If I often differ from other critics, it is through no desire to confute them, but only because my studies have forced me to different conclusions. Thought is free, and if in the hurry of its movements it sometimes falls in and incorporates itself with error, the remedy is at hand in a new and more diligent consideration of the subject.

At first sight it would be no disparagement to Shakespeare to place 'Philaster' side by side with his best tragedy. Throughout the works, indeed, of these

celestial twins¹ there is so much beauty, so rich a store of imagery, so many touching passages and incidents, so constant a recurrence of exquisite descriptions, that to a real lover of sweet imaginative literature they would supply reading for a whole life.

Hazlitt says of Coleridge that he had a knack of preferring the unknown to the known, which, though the habit deserted him in the case of Shakespeare, may account for the preference he accords to the Gothic rather than to the Greek literature. Shakespeare entertained no such preference. Nothing but the scantiness of his knowledge prevented him from diving more deeply into antiquity, and bringing forth from its depths a still larger array of exquisite imageries than those which adorn his plays. His finest thoughts are cast in the very mould of antiquity, he invents as Hellas invented, his imagination sat with Sophocles all night on the banks of the Ilissus and heard the gurgling of the stream mingle with the song of the nightingale. This to me, at least, is one of his greatest charms, because he is never fuller of fancy, never more happy in his conceptions, never sways more resistlessly the powers of our inner nature, than when he invokes the hidden soul of some Greek mythus, or presents us with dewy flowers from the gardens of the Hesperides :

Violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath.²

If there be nothing of this in the mythology, there ought to have been, since it contains no thought or image more beautiful.

¹ Beaumont and Fletcher.

² *The Winter's Tale*, act iv. sc. 3.

If it does not fall to the lot of anyone who speaks truth to judge in the same spirit of all Shakespeare's dealings with antique themes, this is the poet's own fault, or rather misfortune. He should have studied more carefully the topography of his inventions. If he has not done this we may lament the fact, but are under no necessity of denying it. Shakespeare had a genius which would have enabled him under proper conditions to invest with all the colours of life and truth an additional episode of the Trojan War; it was within his competence to revivify the great misanthrope of Athens, and to surround him with circumstances in strict accordance with history, which in this case is only another word for nature; he might have done the same thing for the war of Coriolanus, for the extinction of the republic, for the dalliance and death of the grossest of the Triumvirs, with his shameless partner in licentiousness. But no one who respects himself and cherishes a stern reverence for truth will venture to affirm that Shakespeare fulfilled the conditions which he imposed upon himself when he undertook to write his Greek and Roman plays.

While following the current of Shakespeare's thoughts, through the whole extent of his genuine works, all readers probably experience a desire to ascertain what on many great questions his real opinions were: for example, on religion, on spirit, on matter, on politics, on women, on ethics, and generally on the relations of social life. By a prolonged and careful study, I have sought to arrive at something like a probable conclusion on those subjects, though I by no means flatter myself that I have succeeded in all, or even in most cases.

If language, as has been said, was given to man to

conceal his thoughts, Shakespeare may often be complimented on having skilfully made use of it for that purpose, since there are points on which it seems all but impossible to discern the drift of his reasoning. As a rule it may be affirmed, that when a man aims at veiling his opinions from his contemporaries, and even from posterity, he is impelled into this course by the consciousness that he cherishes notions deemed heterodox by the multitude, and likely therefore to alienate their affections from him. The working of Shakespeare's mind, which appears sometimes to bring forth its conceptions with great throes, convinces me that he is at such times engaged in suggesting ideas which it might be dangerous to express.

No writer of deep and earnest thought has perhaps been able to square all his theories in strict conformity with popular views, though he may desire to keep on good terms with the majority whose favour or disfavour might affect his social well-being; yet the wish to be understood by minds of an elevation like his own must lead him to the employment of symbolical or enigmatical language, intelligible only to the initiated. From time immemorial this practice has been in vogue, since very early reference is made to the words of the wise, and their dark sayings, which however were only dark to the unwise. When Alexander reproached Aristotle for publishing his 'Metaphysics,' since his esoteric doctrines would now, he said, be revealed to everyone, the philosopher replied that none would penetrate their significance but such as deserved to understand them. It is the same with Shakespeare: few with him are admitted behind the veil, perhaps no one completely, so that nothing can be more rash than to predicate of this or that belief that it is Shake-

speare's. Horace, a much more superficial writer, when asking himself how many would comprehend and correctly estimate the whole extent of his conceptions, replies: 'Aut duo, aut nemo.'

Some things whispered at Eleusis have left no echo audible to us; and Shakespeare at the Blackfriars and the Globe gave utterance to many a phrase on which the seal of unintelligibility is still stamped. This to writers like Charles Lamb has suggested the persuasion that Shakespeare's plays ought not to be acted, it being impossible that motley audiences, such as usually fill a theatre, should divine all their meaning. But it is by no means necessary that they should. The language of the passions addresses itself to all grades, and all grades understand it, which is the fact that qualifies Shakespeare to speak to us in our collective capacity. It needs no subtle philosophical apprehension to sympathise with the sorrows of Hamlet, with the jealousy of Othello, with the madness of Lear, with the torturing avarice and the baffled pride of Shylock, or with the devouring love of Juliet. This at least is a language which all who run may read, while they who are gifted with acute powers of observation cannot fail to perceive that behind these obvious phenomena there lies a stratum of subtle thoughts to penetrate which must be a work of time.

Ariel in 'The Tempest' and Puck in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' are spirits, we are told. Did Shakespeare, then, believe in the existence of such spirits? To help ourselves to an answer we must examine the speech of Theseus, the soliloquy of Hamlet, and many other portions of the plays.

Was the conclusion at which Shakespeare had

arrived respecting women favourable or unfavourable? To be able to reply to this question may appear easy; for who has drawn more lovely female characters, who has uttered more gentle or flattering things of women? On the other hand, who has drawn female characters more hideous or revolting, or who has suggested more depreciatory opinions of the sex in general? Yet, balancing the good with the bad, he must have cherished some general conviction, which, carefully considered, will be found to be for or against women. The corner-stone of the female character is chastity, and did Shakespeare upon the whole think them chaste, or did he agree with Aristophanes that when you have named one celebrated example of female virtue you will be constrained to stop because neither history nor tradition records a second? To pursue this inquiry through all Shakespeare's plays proves pleasant or unpleasant according to the decision at which you arrive, or according to your own leanings. Women are dear to men on different grounds, and Shakespeare therefore may be tolerant of them in one sense though adverse in another. At all events, no one who delights in poetical imagery, in pictures of tenderness, in delicious displays of fancy, in the revelations of sweet communion of soul with soul, will grudge the hours he may devote to this fascinating investigation.

Again in what regards religion, ascending from what is sweetest to what is most awful, it is of momentous import to learn what a poet no less philosophical than Æschylus, no less bold than Lucretius, thought of the Divine Nature. The difficulty of the inquiry may appear from this, that some have regarded him as the most religious of poets,

while he has been looked upon by others as totally without religion. When a man ranges freely through the whole world of speculation, he must at times traverse expanses where thought finds little footing, where there is at best but a dim light, where the reason at every glance runs the risk of mistaking shadows for substances, where no guide that can be trusted offers himself, and where the prevalent feeling must be the desire to escape and reach firm land. When Shakespeare found himself so circumstanced his intellect must have been swayed like that of other men by cheerful or depressing influences, springing from the contiguous sources of faith and doubt. What was the course which his understanding at such times traced out for itself? Was it analogous to that which the majority of men select, or did it diverge and plunge far away into dark and unfrequented tracks of speculation?

The greatness of his Atlantean intellect is made evident by the prodigious scope of thought necessitated by his varied and profound investigations, which, however carried on, led in his mind, we cannot doubt, to settled results, and the business is now to ascertain what these were.

Men are intolerant in religion, intolerant in love, but still more intolerant in politics. This conviction apparently renders Shakespeare's enigmas doubly enigmatical, when he speaks of the relations of rulers to society. For this reason he has been suspected by some of believing in divine right, by others of leaning towards aristocracy, while it would not be difficult to discover in his works grounds for charging him with democratic propensities. If we consider it of no importance to come to a decision on this point, it is

professing indifference respecting the conclusions of one of our deepest thinkers. That Shakespeare held political principles cannot be doubted: he had observed the working of various forms of government and watched their effects upon the conditions of social life; he could not refuse therefore to recognise the truths which experience and reason laid before him. It seems worth some pains to make ourselves acquainted with what he thought on this most momentous of the sciences, which takes upon itself in this world to perform the part of Providence by distributing happiness or misery to its inhabitants. I have consequently weighed with the utmost caution and solicitude every expression in Shakespeare which seemed to throw light on his political theory, so that if I have failed to make out to what party he belonged, it is neither through inattention nor through supercilious indifference.

ESSAY II

ART

WHAT is the proper object of art, dramatic or otherwise? Is it not to produce in the mind the same processes of thought and feeling which would be produced by analogous existences in nature? ¹

All the arts are called mimetic or imitative which attempt to produce such effects; but it is by a figure of speech that the poetry of the drama is called imitative, since it only acquires this character when it is spoken by an actor on the stage, where, according as he performs his part well or ill, it becomes a reflex of Nature's doings. The dramatic artist undertakes to exhibit before the public the passions and manners of men and women engaged in developing some particular action, calamitous, humorous, amusing, or involving in its working out all these elements; and, according to the greater or lesser amount of impassioned and disastrous feeling involved in the circumstance of the action, the drama ranges with tragedy or comedy: the latter being understood by Shakespeare to mean a play of which the incidents lead to a happy result, though very little vivacity or merriment may accompany their progress towards the *dénouement*.

¹ Though Hume praises Shakespeare's art, Coleridge will not allow that he understood it. He wrote and spoke on the principle that if you strike hard you must produce an effect, so he introduced the figure of an apothecary's phial striving to contain the waters of Niagara.

It is not my intention, however, to investigate the principles of art in general, except in so far as may be necessary for the purpose of showing how often and to what degree Shakespeare's art, and art as it exists in the highest theory, move side by side or become identical. More than can be read has already been written on this subject; I shall spare myself therefore the labour of seeking to condense what others have said, or indeed to notice it at all, unless where it seems to have misled the public respecting the qualities of Shakespeare as a dramatic writer, and to have suggested at the same time false ideas of other writers who have been brought forward for the purpose of exalting or depreciating the English poet. In the drama there are two kinds of art: first, that which provides a fitting and adequate substratum or field whereon the action about to be represented may take place; and, second, that which organises and arranges the action, and develops it through the instrumentality of suitable characters, that the whole may appear at once natural and probable.¹

A play may therefore be regarded as an exemplification of the logic of circumstances. The nature of the premises being established, the conclusion must necessarily arise out of them, and be the only result to which they could possibly lead. In the Greek drama everything is generally assumed to be brought about by fate, which, if absolute, eliminates from the circle of existence not only the responsibility of man,

¹ An instance of improbability closely approximating to impossibility occurs in *The Tempest*, where the distance from Tunis to Prospero's island appears almost as great as to one of the fixed stars, though a ship traverses it in a brief space of time. But the island, it may be said, is imaginary and may be located anywhere. But the ship is not imaginary nor the sea.

but the very essence of art itself, since under that supposition everything that is thought must be as completely regulated independently of our will as everything that is done. Jocasta in Euripides supplies us with a key to the Greek theory: Laius consults the oracle, and the response is that he may remain childless or have a son. In the former case his family will become extinct in his own person, but without crime; in the second the son he begets will slay him, and initiate a long series of crimes and horrors. Good and evil being placed before him, he chooses the evil and the consequences of the choice follow. Such, for the ancients, was the decision of heaven; there could be no quibbling, no secret interpretation of the response, different from the plain meaning of the words delivered distinctly by perfect truth and unerring wisdom. Shakespeare speaks much of fate and destiny; but what did he understand by the words? Into the mouth of Helena he puts this strange language:

The fated sky
Gives us free scope.

And Horatio, adjuring the ghost:

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid,
O, speak!

Apart from the system of fatality, of which I shall have more to say hereafter, Shakespeare's dramas generally proceed upon the assumption that the persons represented are free agents; and the goal they reach, whether happy or unhappy, is the result of their own wisdom or folly, virtue or crime. In some cases the *dénouement* seems to be brought about by fortune. in

which no moral is evolved from the action, though the interest excited may be very great. As a rule, Shakespeare deals in loose and ill-compacted plots, and his plays are therefore so far inartistic. Strictly speaking, perhaps, no drama, ancient or modern, is in all respects conformable to nature; that is, the actions performed, and the individuals who perform them, are not entirely such as they would be were the affair transacted in real life. The most accomplished artist when happiest in his inventions only approaches so near to Nature that the difference existing between his work and hers shall not be so palpable as to force itself easily on our notice. Supernatural dramas are regulated by laws of their own, and if these be not violated the piece may be looked upon as in harmony with the principles of art. It is as necessary that the 'Prometheus' or 'The Tempest' should be in harmony with itself as that the 'Ædipus at Colonus' or 'Romeo and Juliet' should be so. Assuming the possibility of the action, no inconsistency is discoverable in the 'Prometheus,' who, together with all the agents by whom he is surrounded, exhibits but one disposition, one purpose, and one character throughout. But not so with Prospero in 'The Tempest.' Possessing supernatural power and knowledge, Prospero often acts as if destitute of both, and expresses apprehensions of influences which, according to the poet's theory of his character, he had ample power to control.¹

¹ It is to be understood likewise that he is a Christian. This is proved by his reference to the curfew bell. What, therefore, had he to do with the heathen goddesses? To make their appearance in the mask afford pleasure, some belief in their existence must be created; this is not done, they are only regarded as names, not even shadows, so that nothing is gained by the introduction of them. But masks, it may be said, were then in fashion. Yet Shakespeare should have had

Yet the plot of this play considered merely as a plot, and as we see it developed in action, is one of the completest in Shakespeare. The object to be attained is the punishment of the usurping Duke of Milan with his associate the King of Naples, as well as certain subordinate villains who had co-operated in their crime and looked forward to profit by it. Discovering through his magic art that all his enemies were collected in one ship at sea, he causes it be wrecked in appearance on the shores of his island, and while the sailors are locked safe under the hatches the foes of the magician are all landed, though in separate groups. The heir to the Neapolitan crown, wandering about singly, is brought to the magician's cave, where he falls in love with his daughter ; the king and the duke, with their evil companions, roam about together, but even there plot against each other's lives ; while two serving-men, one of whom is drunk, fall in with Prospero's slave Caliban and enact what there is of comedy in the play. The combinations are few and simple, but the good duke is restored to his throne, raises his daughter to be Queen of Naples, and, beholding his enemies at his feet, ultimately triumphs by forgiving them all.¹

sufficient judgment not to follow the fashion. The same objection lies against the play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though not against that in *Hamlet*.

¹ Charles Lamb, as I have elsewhere said, thought Shakespeare's plays too good to be put on the stage, and when we consider the actors by whom his great thoughts are to be uttered one may be almost tempted to agree with him ; but, on the other hand, when a spacious theatre is properly fitted up, properly lighted, and filled with thousands of spectators, all eagerly listening to the language of the poet as it is delivered by artistic speakers, the play approaches nearer to reality than when read by the fireside. This suggests a question whether our modern theatres, in which the action always takes place by artificial light, produce a more complete illusion than those of antiquity, in which plays were acted by

If there be art here, it is of the homeliest kind, and considered separately from the development and the adjuncts would excite little admiration. In truth, however, Shakespeare depends so little on his plots that he sometimes appears to forget that he had framed one at all, and drifts forward on the surge of his genius, as if sure to produce a grand effect on whatever catastrophe or *dénouement* accident might land him. This recklessness of the means by which results are to be brought about often interferes signally with the economy and beauty of his plays. Both in 'Hamlet' and 'Macbeth' nearly all the displays of power and grandeur are lavished on the first half of the dramas, which fall off in force and beauty as the action proceeds, and terminate in flatness and insipidity. The conviction, or rather feeling, that this is the case has led, especially with regard to 'Hamlet,' to numerous attempts at giving to the play a conclusion more in harmony with the splendour of its commencement; and if the same false policy has not been pursued in regard to 'Macbeth,' it is not because the latter part of the tragedy lies open to less objection than that of 'Hamlet,' but because fewer persons have imagined themselves equal to grappling with the subject.

daylight. Wordsworth gives a fine description of the prospect commanded from the benches of the Dionysiac Theatre at Athens—the Saronic Gulf, the islands of Ægina and Salamis, the shore on the left hand stretching away towards Sunium, and on the right the rugged coast of Peloponnesus with its blue mountains overhung by a blue sky. The near prospect, however, the place of the chorus, the thymele, the hyposcenion, the stage itself, the three great portals in the background, and the theologeion above, together with the side scenes artistically painted, all these, though very large, were still too diminutive to harmonise completely with the magnificent scenery in the background.

As a work of art 'Lear' is still more defective than 'Hamlet' or 'Macbeth,' while nearly all the characters are farther removed from nature. The story is, in substance, that of *Œdipus* modified to bring it more into harmony with modern ideas. Lear is the old King of Thebes driven forth from his palace by two of his children, masculine in the Hellenic original, feminine in Shakespeare—for Regan and Goneril, though different in sex, are obviously Eteocles and Polynices, though the latter at their worst are less hateful than Shakespeare's two princesses. Cordelia is a poor pale copy of *Antigone*, who overtops all other female characters of the drama in filial tenderness and devotion as much as Juliet does in love. Coleridge, in his peculiar way of reasoning, maintains that Shakespeare's judgment is at least equal to his genius. Genius, however, is made up of several elements, of which judgment is one, and it is the one in which Shakespeare is most deficient. Throughout the tragedy now in question, the absence of judgment must often be felt by all who think for themselves. Lear is made to exclaim more than once in the course of the play that he fears he shall lose his wits, though from the first scene in which he makes his appearance it is evident that he has lost them already. The overwhelming tempest of horror in which *Œdipus* blinds himself is still attributable to an adequate cause, since man never found himself borne down by circumstances more calamitous.

Lear's abdication of power is intelligible, the weakness of age having disqualified him for the exercise of it; but the conditions of his resignation are so irrational that the conviction of his insanity is irresistibly forced upon us. It would be rash to

attempt to sound the depths of wickedness of which women may be capable, but it may be safely affirmed that Regan and Goneril do not belong to the female sex any otherwise than children with two heads belong to our species—that is, as dreadful irregularities of nature. The scene in which Regan incites her husband to tear out old Gloucester's eyes, cast them on the floor, and put his heel upon them while she stands by applauding the deed, is scarcely in harmony with even a bad woman's nature. Indeed, the whole tenor of her character, as well as that of her sister, is monstrous, and therefore oversteps the limits of art. Edmund, too, the most influential male villain of the piece, cherishes an almost motiveless hatred of his father, whose ribald speech when he introduced him as his bastard to Kent, though it might have justified a sudden flash of anger, could not generate a rancour so remorseless as that which actuates his parricidal conduct. In fact, however, the whole economy of the play is so little in harmony with nature, or with the manners of any age or country, that it is impossible to uphold its author's claim to judgment in its invention or treatment. How then, it may be asked, are we so profoundly affected by reading it or witnessing its performance? I will examine this question in another place.

In considering subjects of this kind we are thrown back sometimes on the general laws of human nature, sometimes upon the mere instincts of our species. Why is it that nearly all Teutonic nations are not only ready to confess the power of Shakespeare's genius, but eager to enjoy the pleasure which his poetical creations afford, while nations of Latin origin can scarcely be brought to recognise his merits at all?

Coleridge persuaded himself that it is because whole nations, like separate individuals, may by habit and training have their minds swayed by a perverted taste. The sting of this observation is meant for the French, whose theory of intellectual pleasure differs, more especially in what relates to the drama, from that which prevails in England and Germany. But the causes of the difference may lie much deeper. As between us and the Semitic peoples there appears to exist in the mind a difference of essence, so that the very sources of thought and original forms of ideas in each race belong to a separate category; in like manner, though less strikingly, the sense of beauty in the Teuton contrasts with that of the Italian, the Spaniard, and the Romanised Gaul.

It were consequently unphilosophical for an individual, immersed in the intellectual influences predominant in either of these divisions of mankind, to affirm his own mode of thinking and judging to be better than that of his neighbours. It is more intimately united with a man even than the object of his love, since in the selection of this he may have exercised choice, while the former is anterior to every act of the will, and has formed, coloured, given a direction to the very power of choice. Study, no doubt, if conducted on true principles, may elevate a man above all predilections of race or country, and qualify him to judge impartially of all creations of art, and it is only an individual so disciplined who can decide between conflicting theories of the becoming, the beautiful, the probable, and the natural.

Up to this time there has nowhere existed a perfect dramatic art. That of the Greeks possesses great beauty, and attains the aim it proposes to itself more

completely than any other. But its field of action is circumscribed, and so are the means and instruments at its command. While dwelling upon its most finished productions we feel impatient at what appears to be the timidity of the poet, who, we fancy, should have emancipated himself from those rules by which his genius appears to be 'cabined, cribbed, confined,' and have taken a vaster range through the resources and regions of possibility.

But the Greek drama was the natural and matured fruit of the Greek mind, and satisfied the Greek craving after the pleasure derivable from mimetic art. The modern drama—at the head of which, in our estimation, Shakespeare stands—assigns to itself a much wider field; but, misled apparently by the vastness of its possessions, has neglected, or found it impracticable, to model even the most felicitous of its productions in strict conformity with any theory of art. Nothing in poetical literature, whether ancient or modern, rises in the highest excellences of poetry above 'Romeo and Juliet,' and yet in this most consummate of Shakespeare's masterpieces there is a defect in constructive art, which is generally, however, thrown out of sight by the magic splendours of passion and poetry which it underlies. Is the young and beautiful Capulet, the very model of love and truth, whose tender utterances know no parallel in the records of historical or poetical women—is Juliet, I say, constrained by the inevitable necessity of the circumstances by which she is surrounded to take the sleeping potion given her by the friar, out of which act spring misery, desolation, and death to her family, her lover, and herself? Unfortunately there exists no such necessity; since by the confession of the friar himself

she might have lain concealed in his cell till she could effect her escape from Verona to her lover at Mantua.

Friar Laurence, we are told, had secret apartments constructed beneath his cell, with a bed 'soft and trimly drest,'

Where he was wont in youth his fair friends to bestow,
There now he hideth Romeo—

and might unquestionably have hidden Juliet, so that the taking of the sleeping potion was unnecessary. When Romeo visits Juliet after their marriage, Shakespeare describes them as passing the night in her chamber, but Bandello says that it was on a bank in the corner of the garden. When Romeo and Juliet were together the last night, she offers to leave Verona with him; says she will cut off her long hair, and escape with him in the disguise of a youth. Besides, the plays abound with ladies who, disguised as youths, elude the strictest watchfulness and go whithersoever their fancy prompts. But Juliet is not watched at all; she leaves and returns to her father's house in perfect freedom; and it is therefore by no fatal coercion, but by a mere oversight of genius, that she is induced to counterfeit death, and so bring about the catastrophe.

In mere construction 'Othello' is less imperfect, though it lacks many of the excellences which abound in 'Romeo and Juliet.' It is less poetical, less impassioned, less impetuous in the flow of action, and in every respect less pleasing. There is no character we can love, or in any high degree respect. Othello, as far as we know, is an upright and honourable man, loving after his fashion, true likewise to the object of his love, but weak and credulous to folly. Cassio is

a handsome simpleton, framed, as Iago says, to 'make women false'—but only such women as possess no brains themselves, and require none in their lovers. Emilia, whatever her practice may be, is by nature and in theory a courtesan; and Desdemona, though with limitations, distinctions, and differences, belongs to the same category.¹ She is by no means wanting in understanding, can reason logically on occasion, and sincerely believes herself in love with her husband; but with that subtle art which is nowhere so clearly shown as in the delineation of character we have revealed to us the most secret springs and recesses of her idiosyncrasy, so that we know her better than she knows herself, and can foresee what her future course, if she has a future, is almost sure to be.

In many parts of his works Shakespeare places before us contrivances which are not only inconsistent with true art, but so little rational as to be actually puerile. Among these must be reckoned wooing by proxy, the mistaking of women for men through the mere effect of a masculine habit, and that too under circumstances in which such an error would be impossible. Could Orlando fail to discover Rosalind, while gazing at her whole face, kissing her, inhaling her breath, looking into her eyes, when love had previously

¹ Schlegel, however, regards her as a sacrifice without blemish, a creature of 'angelic purity,' whose only fault is having married without her father's consent.

When Coleridge wrote his criticism on *Othello* he must have taken an extra dose of opium; he exhibits the extravagance of the schoolboy, the pedantry of the critic, and the affected solemnity of the would-be philosopher. He has Schlegel in his eye, and directs a large portion of his sarcasm against him. The Germans took *Othello* to be a negro, and so did Shakespeare; but Coleridge contradicts the poet as to his own meaning, and assures him he had no such intention, and did not at all mean what he says.

rendered him familiar with every feature of her countenance? Could this go on for days and weeks when the pressure of her hand, the music of her voice, aided in establishing her identity? Such stage tricks are actually intolerable, and should have been eschewed like poison by a genius so great as that of Shakespeare. The want of art is so apparent in some plays that the whole may almost be regarded as an abortion, which is the case more especially with 'Cymbeline' and 'Troilus and Cressida,' though there are found in both, but especially in the latter, scenes and passages of the rarest beauty. I speak, however, of their general construction as works of art. Can anything be more remote from nature and probability than the groundwork of 'Cymbeline'? To say nothing of the jumbling up of manners, the locating of modern Frenchmen and Italians in ancient Rome, with the gross anachronism of throwing back many centuries the follies of the chivalrous era, the leading incidents are so preposterous as to defy even that kind of belief which we accord to what takes place on the stage.¹

It would not do to take exception at the difference between Imogen's character and her conduct, since every day's experience proves to us that virtuous and delicate women often link themselves in love to worthless men. As a rule, however, time removes the scales

¹ Yet Schlegel says that this is 'one of Shakespeare's most wonderful compositions,' 'he has contrived by the most gentle transitions to blend together into one harmonious whole the social manners of the newest times with olden heroic deeds, and even with appearances of the gods.'

'In the character of Imogen, no one feature of female excellence is omitted: her chaste tenderness, her softness and her virgin pride, her boundless resignation, and her magnanimity towards her mistaken husband.'

from the eyes of the most infatuated, so that their idols either become their abhorrence, or at least lose the hold which they once possessed upon their minds; but in Imogen the illusion is proof against all discoveries, so that, as the action of the play proceeds, she sinks instead of rising in our estimation. At the Court of Cymbeline we start from these premises: a king infatuated by a female poisoner, somewhat declined, like Othello, into the vale of years, since she has a son of mature age who is one of the fools and villains of the play; next we have the princess Imogen, her husband Posthumus, his faithful servant Pisanio, and an honest doctor, who appears but is not in league with the malignant old lady who governs the whole Court. Far away in a cavern among the mountains in Wales lives a worthy nobleman, who, through fear of the Queen's medical skill or to revenge his own exile, stole away in childhood the King's two sons, whom, however, he treated as his own and brought up with the greatest care. Such are the materials of the play, with the addition of an Italian miscreant and a host of Romans who throng the scene in Shakespeare's worst manner.¹

To complete the confusion of ideas with Italians, Frenchmen, and German Emperors, evidently of Christian growth, Jupiter is brought in, together with a number of ghosts who conduct themselves in a most irreverent manner towards the god.

It would, in my opinion, be impossible to crowd together, in so short a space, a greater amount of

¹ The discovery of Cloten's body, the rhapsodies of Imogen, the coming in of Lucius, with all the incidents attending, are perfectly monstrous in one who has been called the poet of nature. Nothing imaginable can be more unnatural.

nonsense than we find in the scene between Jupiter and the ghosts. If there be impiety anywhere in Shakespeare it is here, where, by alluding to his sulphureous breath, he suggests the idea of a devil rather than a god. On such a foundation even Shakespeare's genius failed to build up a tolerable superstructure. The play, in fact, is heavy and disjointed, equally at strife with nature and probability, lumbering in its progress, disagreeable in its incidents, and, in short, possessing nothing to recommend it but the fidelity of Pisanio and the beauty, tenderness, and love of Imogen, which shed a glory on improbability and soften, so as to render bearable, the worthlessness of Posthumus. The wager, for example, of Posthumus and Iachimo, which could only have been made by men at once forgetful of themselves and of their relations to society. Had Posthumus possessed the slightest feeling of a gentleman, he could not have exposed his wife's purity and delicacy to the polluting attempts of so odious an individual as Iachimo. To what extent folly may proceed it would be difficult to determine, and therefore if we assume at once that Posthumus was a fool we may credit the incident of the wager, which we must otherwise reject as unnatural. As a complement to this wager his letter to Imogen is to be examined. In this he is guilty of more than one falsehood: first, he says Iachimo is a man of the noblest note; second, he says, Iachimo is one to whose kindnesses he is infinitely tied—the gross falsehood of this assertion is evident; he then goes on to impress on Imogen's mind the propriety of receiving a man whom he knew to be a miscreant with the favour and kindness due to a highminded friend. If there be such a thing as baseness, this is

base, it being nothing less than a trap for the unwary virtue of his wife. The incident of the coffer is absurd, but leads to the beautiful scene in Imogen's bedchamber.

No one can read 'Troilus and Cressida' without regretting that want of art or judgment in the writer should have spoiled so splendid a theme. Had the range of the action been kept within legitimate limits—that is, had the attempt not been made to compress a vast war into a story of two lovers—we might have had a drama rivalling even 'Romeo and Juliet' in beauty and interest, though of a different character and catastrophe; the heroes and chiefs, though many of them magnificent in themselves, are much too big for the piece, and move about as if conscious of being out of place.¹

The scenes in Troy with Paris, Helen, Hector, Andromache, Cressida, and others are not merely unclassical, but out of keeping with all poetical tradition and immersed in a depth of grossness which defies all sympathy. Among the Greeks outside much the same thing is observable. By undertaking to deal with such characters as Achilles, Patroclus, Ulysses, and their companions, the poet tacitly professed to be engaged with personages already known through the teaching of antiquity, so that we could not be prepared to find so strange a burlesque of the Trojan War as the play presents us with. No one doubts that, whether for good or evil, Shakespeare, with the intellectual power he possessed, could effect much; but when he attempted to reverse the whole Homeric system failure was the almost necessary result, indeed

¹ Æneas, after having known Agamemnon for nine years, is introduced speaking as if he were ignorant of his person.

I might say necessary, since nearly the whole poetical literature of the world, existing before his time, was in harmony with the belief and convictions which he sought to set aside. As a play, consequently, 'Troilus and Cressida' must be looked upon as an enterprise which no amount of genius could have crowned with success. Ulysses says the state is acquainted with our thoughts even in their dumb cradles; but Homer represents even the gods as ignorant of our thoughts till they are uttered in words. In Shakespeare's particular case various causes concurred to render failure unavoidable.

In the first place, Shakespeare's knowledge, not only of that but of every other portion of antiquity, was too limited to enable him to represent, with verisimilitude, the characters, manners, and mental influences which distinguished the period. There is a book, familiar to most of the writers on Shakespeare, on the three destructions of Troy, by which he suffered himself to be misled. The writer, a slovenly and ignorant compiler from the forgeries of Dictys the Cretan, Dares the Phrygian, and other writers equally worthless, was swayed by Trojan leanings, and such fancies as those which peopled this island with fugitives from Ilion, and believed, or at least thought, that the original name of London was Troy Novant, or Troy. No man can transport his imagination back to a remote period so thoroughly as to be able to paint a correct picture of things as they really existed. Even Virgil, learned as he was, found it impracticable to revive the feelings, habits of mind, system of thought, and peculiarities of belief, by which the nations he undertook to describe were differenced from the generations before and after them. Every

period has its peculiar physiognomy, and to attribute to it any other is to be wanting in one of the highest requisites of art. It needs no long array of reasons to prove that Shakespeare did not possess that first requisite, because it is only necessary to read the play to be convinced of it. He does not represent the heroic age, neither does he represent any other age.¹

His men and women, taken altogether, are such as never lived, or could have lived, being piecemeal productions made up out of the peculiarities of different times and countries, so that the whole is a medley, developing false ideas, both of persons and things. Hector quoting Aristotle, and Pandarus talking of Winchester geese, are symbols of the confusion of ideas existing in Shakespeare's mind when he set himself up as a competitor of Homer as poet of the Trojan War. Among the sons of Priam there was no Troilus; among the lewd women of the time there was no Cressida; but in fact there is not an individual character in the play which, with the idiosyncrasies attributed to it by Shakespeare, could have existed in the heroic age. All are of modern growth—that is, in their elements—for in their entirety they are impossible entities.

¹ They who fancy that Shakespeare could not be wrong will probably defend him for mixing up the manners of different ages, making Greeks and Trojans speak the fantastic language of chivalry, and dispute and fight to establish the superior beauty of their respective mistresses. Both Greeks and Trojans had doubtless wives and other women, but were not so stupid as to quarrel in the field or in the camp about their comparative charms. Helen may have been the pretext of the war, but it was to avenge a crime that it was undertaken, and would have been undertaken whether she had been fair or not. The object was to punish wrong, not to regain possession of an abandoned woman.

To the same class of drama belongs 'Timon of Athens,' which, though terminating with the hero's death, is rather a comedy than a tragedy. That there lived at Athens such a man as Timon is true; the period, however, in which he flourished was looked upon as remote, even in the age of the Peloponnesian War. His story is not in many respects ill-told by Shakespeare, though here again he jumbles different ages together, since, following the later writers, he makes his misanthrope contemporary with Alcibiades, as well as with certain noblemen who, though located at Athens, are unquestionably Romans of the time of Julius Cæsar.

According to tradition, Timon was a person who, having lavished his riches upon worthless men, retired from society in disgust; wandering about recklessly, he fell down a precipice, broke his leg, and, there being no physician within reach, died of the accident. His friends—for he appears to have had friends—gave him sepulchre and a tomb in a wild spot near the sea on the road from Athens to Sunium. The defects in the play are obvious: Timon is not so much generous as madly prodigal, possessing no discrimination, no regard for virtue or abilities of any kind, but mistaking waste for munificence, lavishing his substance on fools, flatterers, and miscreants. The return he met with was that which his folly deserved. Had he known how to give he would have made friends instead of traitors. As it was, all those around him were neither base nor ungrateful, since he possessed a faithful steward and a host of servants who, though in a humble situation, displayed all the virtues which were so strikingly wanting in their social superiors. In this circumstance Timon should have found something to

console him for the want of gratitude he had discovered in his gay and licentious associates. And here I may notice that Shakespeare, as a rule, attributes gratitude and kindness of heart to domestic servants, who, from Adam to Griffith, display attachment and a grateful remembrance of benefit received.

Coleridge when settling Shakespeare's politics, which he assumes to have been aristocratic, says he does not make every magistrate a fool, nor every poor man virtuous. True, but his magistrates are generally fools, while his servants, both male and female, are upon the whole distinguished for their affection and fidelity. With respect to Timon, he is to be regarded rather as a myth than a man; his generosity is madness and his resentment is the same; it degenerates, in fact, into comedy, since he raves, as Juliet says Romeo kissed, by the book, and when he meant to make his final retreat from the world dug his own grave, built his own monument, cut his own epitaph, and then, it is to be presumed, crept into his tomb, covered himself up comfortably, and expired, as a misanthrope should, with railing and hatred on his lips. Is this being true to nature and probability? Is it not rather farce of the most extravagant kind? I am aware that there are those who will say that the form of the play is of no moment, provided we have a number of wise sayings and fine keen satire on the vices and follies of mankind. Be it so, but then let us hear no more of Shakespeare's matchless truth to nature in the delineation of character and in the expression of passion. Timon is unnatural in both, and must be regarded as a mere vehicle of contempt and disdain for the weaknesses, follies, imperfections, and vices of the world.

Shakespeare no doubt presents us with some characters that are natural, and with many that are nearly so—of which I shall speak more hereafter; but, as we have seen, he has drawn others without skill, placed them in impossible situations, and if he has, in passing, awakened our sympathy it is rather by subtle suggestion than by artistic handling of character. But experience, it may be said, has proved that although Shakespeare may have been deficient in art, as art is generally understood, and as it is found to exist in some other dramatic poets, he yet possessed an art of his own, which enabled him to take and keep possession of public admiration from his own age to ours. What this art is may possibly appear during the present inquiry; that it is not that of adhering closely to nature may be affirmed at once, because his characters taken as a whole, and whether differing from or resembling each other, are yet generally different from the types in nature which they are intended to represent. Yet when he puts forward a character he believes in it himself, assumes it to be natural, argues from its peculiarities to consequences arising certainly out of them, and by this intrepid dependence on the correctness of his own views prevails upon his auditor or reader to share in his faith.

Whatever Shakespeare as a man may not have been, he unquestionably was gentle, loving, humane, merciful, and all the virtues corresponding to these qualities spring up in his plays as luxuriantly as plants in an Eastern garden. Above all, his mind had that quality which we call sweetness, than which nothing in human nature is more attractive. When we say a sweet woman, a sweet child, we mean to indicate an individual the nature of whose fascination we are

unable to explain. We say also sometimes a sweet poem, which may have many faults, may be written contrary to rule, may even be absurd in parts, but if it lays hold of the mind, if it gives birth to delicious thoughts, if it leaves behind it in the memory something redolent of joy and gladness, we often delight to recollect it, and this constitutes its immortality.

What I have just been saying is pre-eminently true of Shakespeare. He is prolific of passages which everybody loves to remember, which pass from mouth to mouth, which gradually nestle in and take their place in the innermost recesses of the language, and invariably reckon for much in the expression of the national mind. This implies in the poet the possession of an art so transcendent as to defy analysis or definition, and we seek to get rid of the difficulty by calling it genius. But genius itself is art, though of a nature so refined and subtle that it can only be discerned in its effects. We scarcely approximate to a solution of the problem by describing it as a form of power which, moving over a stratum of deep and varied knowledge of human nature, touches and moves it in so many parts as at least to seem coextensive with the field of action. Herein lies the source of Shakespeare's influence over men. There are few situations in the conditions of the passions, feelings, hopes, fears, misfortunes, or happiness of human beings in which some expression cannot be found in Shakespeare to suit the peculiar state of the mind at the moment. Some of these results of thought, or ebullitions of fancy, may be altogether different from other thoughts and fancies to be elsewhere found in the poet's sayings, so as to often make him seem in contradiction with himself; but all men, if strictly examined, will be found in

contradiction with themselves. The mind and intellect are all but infinite, and every fresh combination of thought gives birth to a fresh expression which accounts for the endless variety in the language of productive minds. As we gaze over it we observe here a blossom, and there a blossom, the stem and root of which lie hidden far down in the depths of the metaphysical world—and these blossoms, rare and beautiful as they may be, like the glitter of some twinkling leaf in a forest, can never be beheld but once, as in the hurry and infinite procession of ideas there is no time for looking back, for the surge of existence bears you forward, so that every successive moment must present new phases and shows of things.

In these considerations we discover the source of Shakespeare's multitudinous imagery, which is so rich and copious that it suggests the idea of infinity. In the minds of all men there lie hidden the germs of all feelings, passions, virtues and vices, which, according to the age and country in which they live, exchange denominations, and are held to be blamable or blameless; in Sybaris one form of thought, in Sparta another. Now in Shakespeare both the Sybarite and the Spartan may find what will suit his idiosyncrasy—in fact, he may be read in a club, a church, or a charnel-house with equal influence and propriety. This gives his writings the character of a wilderness of vast extent, in which weeds and flowers, plants balsamic and plants venomous, with trees of all foliage grow side by side, not arranged orderly as in a trim garden, but flung promiscuously together as in a tropical jungle. This peculiarity of Shakespeare's works creates the difficulty of searching out his

philosophy, the presence of which is everywhere felt, and often in proportion to the absence of art. What he has to say he will and does say, whether in season or out of season, though some action of the piece, as he himself expresses it, be slackened by the proceeding.

ESSAY III

ART IN TRAGEDY

ONE of Shakespeare's departures from the old laws of the drama, whether defensible or not, necessarily gave rise to another, for when a play was converted into a biography or into a history it was no longer desirable, or even possible, to preserve that unbroken flow of sympathy with misfortune which constitutes one of the greatest beauties of Greek tragedy. In this we discern numerous tracks of action and interest converging upon one point, and producing the catastrophe by their union. There is little opportunity for change of place, for the lengthening out of time, for the co-operation of numerous characters; the shock of antagonistic emotions absorbs the sympathy of the spectators, which goes on augmenting till it reaches that point at which the action of the piece terminates in calamity or success. Into so limited a field of emotion it would be obviously impossible to introduce that variety of situations, that change of scene, that opposition of feelings, that contrast of the grave and gay, which are the characteristics of modern tragedy, especially as it exists in Shakespeare. Length of time is obviously indispensable to bring about all the results upon which this form of the drama is built up. But what length of time? A few hours, or even a day or days, will seldom suffice to develop the whole of the action

involved in the poet's plan ; but as the interest he aims at, depending chiefly on accumulation of circumstances, cannot in general be created without assuming a succession of events, each of which must be the growth of time, the modern drama is necessarily to some extent historical. It is common to maintain that it therefore more nearly resembles life. But as an hour of life is as much a section of eternity as a year, a picture of what takes place in that hour may be as complete as a picture of what takes place in a year. Now, if by art and skill the poet, without outraging probability, can crowd into the period of time consumed in enacting the drama upon the stage incidents and events sufficient to form a grand and absorbing representation, it seems to me a proof of greater genius than gleaned from the multiplied incidents of months and years materials of a striking drama. Yet the Greeks themselves felt the want of something to soften the effect of continuous gloom upon the mind ; and, therefore, when a trilogy had been performed, sought the delight of contrast by the introduction of a satiric drama, of which one specimen only remains to us ; therefore, though they generally avoid mixing up the tragic and comic elements in one piece, they included both in one day's enjoyment.

Unfortunately for man, the elements of tragedy are far more widely scattered than those of comedy ; yet though in this point of view they are more common, their effect upon the mind is not in the ratio of their commonness. Shakespeare, who had assiduously studied the philosophy of life, together with the relations of the eternal world to man, clearly perceived that his happiness or misery depends less on things lying outside of himself than on the ideas and passions of

his own mind; and, accordingly, though he had an eye for whatever is beautiful in the physical universe, his greatest efforts were directed towards mastering the art of putting in play the forces of our inner nature, and exhibiting the ethical result. The sources of pain and pleasure lying close to each other in the human heart, the complete dramatic writer must be able to draw with equal facility from each, so as to present to man a picture of his whole nature. The greatest law of existence appears to be vicissitude. Storms and sunshine, heat and cold, conflict with and chase each other in the material world, and an exactly similar process takes places within us, since neither joy nor sorrow long maintains the mastery over our feelings, though, however we may account for it, such is our nature that our souls are rendered purer and more beautiful by affliction than by prosperity. Yet in the darkest hours of life the mind will strive to escape even but for a moment from the sorrow that oppresses it, and catch a glimpse of joy. In obedience to this law of contrast Shakespeare mingles in his tragedies laughter and merriment with sorrow and death, and has put a sort of apology for his theory into the mouth of Hamlet's uncle:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
The memory be green, and that it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom
To be contracted in one brow of woe,
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
That we with wisest sorrow think on him,
Together with remembrance of ourselves.
Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
The imperial jointress of this war-like state,
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With one auspicious and one dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife.

Having adopted this canon of art, Shakespeare has introduced into all his tragedies more or less of the comic element. 'Romeo and Juliet,' based upon the passions of wild youth, naturally exhibits the most sudden vicissitudes and the most violent contrasts. While contemplating the progress of the action, we seem to be gazing on the flash of sunshine and the shadow over the fields in spring. The mirth is as licentious as the gloom is deep, and death springs forth at last from the womb, as it were, of voluptuousness and joy. In 'Othello,' the tragedy of middle life and mature passions, the comedy is ghastly, arising chiefly from the proceedings of a murderer and fool. The lively scenes in 'Hamlet,' in which the principal character invariably figures, are least in harmony with the design of tragedy, since while they detract from the dignity of the speaker they are equally at variance with the moral character of the play. From 'Lear' the author almost excludes comedy, and still more completely from 'Macbeth,' which consequently more nearly approaches in spirit the tragedies of Æschylus and Sophocles.

In all these cases, save one, it may be questioned whether anything is gained by the occasional interruption of the tragic feeling. An ingenious critic may perceive beauty and fitness in the ribaldry of the fool in 'Lear,' and the obscenity of the witches and the porter in 'Macbeth'; but though there is nature in the speech of the drunken ruffian at the thane's castle, it might perhaps have been dispensed with as almost the only interruption of the tragic current surging forward throughout the play. It is common among critics, when balancing the merits of ancient and modern tragedy, to decide without hesitation in favour

of the latter, because of some superior conformity to nature which they discover in it. This decision seems, in some cases at least, to be founded upon a sort of patriotic partiality, because the greatest of modern dramatists was our countryman. 'Amicus Plato, amicus Socrates, sed magis amica veritas.' If we carefully inquire to what cause in ancient tragedy the catastrophe is to be traced, we shall find that, although human agency is discoverable in the foreground, we are always conscious of the presence of that awful and unknown power on which man has bestowed the name of Fate.

Prometheus on the cliff owes his sufferings to nothing mortal, but to the anger of the supreme ruler of the world, whose vengeance he defies; hence the shaking of the earth, the disparting of the crags and rocks, the toppling over of the precipices, the lightnings, the thunders, and the thick darkness which sweep over him in one commingled tempest as he disappears from our sight; hence also the blinding and the torturing anguish which terminate the prosperity of Œdipus, and the strange sublimity of his descent through the rifted earth. In Shakespeare the catastrophe is brought about by murder, suicide, or chance medley, though this naked statement of fact by no means impugns the dramatic power of the author. In some moods of mind we prefer one course of action, in other moods a different one; and it is therefore very intelligible that in ages so remote from each other as the twentieth century and the fifth before the Christian era there should be difference in the sentiments of spectators regarding the *dénouement* of a play.

But after all it is not in structure that the chief merit of a drama is to be looked for. A landscape

as we find it in Poussin or Claude Lorraine, has, like an epic poem, a beginning, a middle, and an end, because painting, like every other form of art, aims at completeness; whereas, if you regard the finest scenes in nature, they are all with rare exceptions only parts of some vast whole, which the eye never and the mind but seldom can take in at once. In this respect Shakespeare's greatness resembles that of nature. You come abruptly on a vast course of action, of which, as in 'Lear,' 'Othello,' and 'Macbeth,' you never see the commencement. The actors, without reference to your ignorance, proceed with their own concerns, out of which events naturally spring up, challenge your notice, rivet your interest. You are swept into the current, form part of the moving, thrilling scene, and only awake to consciousness when the potent illusion is dispelled by the catastrophe.

But the connection of what goes before with what follows is seldom so close that the series of events might not be easily shortened or protracted. Numerous scenes occur which are not necessary to the development of the action, and to these several others might be added without interrupting the progress of the drama. In life it is exactly the same. Everything a man does is not necessary to the setting forth of his visible conduct, though the hidden chain of motives and actions may, for aught we know, be one indissoluble whole.

From what I have said above, it follows that in plays like those of Shakespeare we may always expect to find more or less surplusage, and our expectation is never disappointed. It may doubtless be said that this very surplusage, the redundant growth of a prolific imagination, is itself too full of beauty and value to be

voluntarily dispensed with. But this is not the question. Would not the play be better without it, more symmetrical, less disturbed in action, more entirely one, if these superfluous excellences were sacrificed?

What are the plays on which Shakespeare's fame as a tragic poet most securely rests? Five in all—'Romeo and Juliet,' 'Macbeth,' 'Hamlet,' 'Othello,' and 'Lear.' Payne Knight, with several other critics, regards 'Macbeth' as Shakespeare's greatest work, and there are certainly passages in that play which rise to a greater elevation than anything to be found in any other play. There are in it also three characters of immense distinctness and originality—Lady Macbeth, Macbeth himself, and Banquo—around whose fates an interest of the deepest kind is thrown. Yet this interest—stormy, dark, and absorbing as it is—is less absorbing than that which envelops the young, beautiful, and innocent Capulet to the latest moment of her existence. Macbeth's Queen is indisputably a magnificent woman, endowed with beauty, love, ambition, and resistless courage. But even Shakespeare's genius found it a task beyond his resources to keep her long upon the stage. She comes in like a whirlwind, exerts her baleful influence, burns herself a way into the inmost soul of spectator or reader, never again to be dislodged from thence, and then disappears as some bright and destructive meteor vanishes from the firmament. Still more than her husband she is the soul of the tragedy, which languishes in her absence, and as to interest, dies with her, since all that follows is 'stale, flat, and unprofitable.' Juliet's career doubtless contrasts with hers; she steals upon us peacefully and sweetly as some lovely star glides up into the blue; she appears at first as the incarnation of gentle love;

her passions, however, rapidly acquire force and vehemence, her soul expands, fills the theatre, excites deep emotion in a thousand hearts, flashes beauty about her like some god, fascinates her lover to madness, and then in a blaze of passion, tenderness, and magnanimity descends into the tomb. Juliet, in fact, in my opinion, is the greatest of Shakespeare's creations, and I envy few more than those who saw her impersonated as she ought to be with congenial beauty and intellect by Miss O'Neill.¹

Nowhere has Shakespeare given proof of his subtle perception of the true nature of love more than in the parting scene between Juliet and Romeo. A cluster of the grandest and most beautiful ideas throws splen-

¹ Miss O'Neill, the famous actress, who married Mr., afterwards Sir H., Wrixon Becher, preserved her faculties and dramatic power to the last. The following anecdote was told me by the late Baroness Burdett-Coutts: At one time a friend who read well used to call at Stratton Street about tea time, and read to those assembled different scenes from Shakespeare's plays. One afternoon Lady Becher happened to be present, and inquired from what play the gentleman proposed to select passages that day. 'From "Romeo and Juliet,"' he replied. 'Then,' said she, 'let us have the balcony scene; I will take the part of Juliet to your Romeo.' All the ladies present tried to persuade her not to attempt it, but she only remarked: 'I can understand what is your object; you think I shall make myself ridiculous, but I shall not.' She left the room, and when she returned she had skilfully wrapped a lace shawl round her head, through which you could only partially distinguish her features. She stepped on to a slightly raised dais which was then in the drawing-room, and the scene began. All were astonished; her genius had not abandoned her, and she acted the part with striking effect; her voice was beautifully modulated, and it retained much of its former sweetness. The part of Juliet had evidently been a favourite one of hers, and she appeared to remember every line of it.

I used to associate this anecdote with the late Henry Irving, but the dates will not allow it, as the Baroness's intimate friendship with that distinguished man did not commence until after the death of Lady Becher. I now feel assured that it was Mr. Young, the son of the famous actor of Miss O'Neill's day, that read the words of Romeo. I may add that the part of Romeo was totally unsuited to Irving. Between the years 1860 and 1872, at which latter date Lady Becher died, I used to meet her at Stratton Street, and although in the former year Lady Becher was already seventy, she retained so much vivacity as to surprise all who heard her converse.

dour over its despair: the lark, the nightingale, the pomegranate tree, the misty mountain tops, the vaulty heavens encircle the pale beauty of the girl, as from her lattice she looks down for the last time upon her lover in the garden. The livery of past delight had settled on them both—she fancies she beholds him dead at the bottom of a tomb: he is no less struck by her colourless cheeks; and then the bright curtain of life descends, never for them to be again drawn up. But they have lived, they have loved.

The tree of knowledge has been plucked,
All's known.

Some German critics, holding a strange theory of ethics, regard the love which Shakespeare has developed in this character, as well as in that of Romeo, as corrupting and debased; but what man deserving the name would not desire to be so debased and corrupted? All that is sweet and delicate in life, all that translates it out of the region of brute matter into that of spirit, all that sheds a lustre and perfume on existence, is infused and concentrated by Shakespeare in this most perfect embodiment of the female character. If earth were peopled by Juliets, 'life would not yield to age.' Hallam, no mean name in literature, refuses to reckon Juliet among Shakespeare's great women. Perhaps, indeed, she ought not to be reckoned among any women, great or little, but to form a class apart, above and superior to them all. To prove her close relationship to us, however, she has her weaknesses, her failings, her little vices: she equivocates with her mother, is imperious with her nurse, froward with her father, and too submissive to the friar.

How far Shakespeare was acquainted with antiquity and through what channels he studied it, is of no

moment, but that after a fashion he did study it, and derive much benefit from the study, may be regarded as past doubt.

The calamities and sorrows of the house of Atreus appear to have made a powerful impression on his mind and to have inspired him with a wish to reproduce, through some analogous circumstances in modern times, a tragic story involving the same elements, and resulting in a similar catastrophe. In the trilogy of Æschylus we have a wife who, in conjunction with her paramour, murders her husband. The son of the adulteress, returning home from a foreign country, determines at the instigation of the gods to avenge his father's murder, and with the aid of a friend accomplishes his purpose by killing both the guilty individuals.

This subject struck Shakespeare as pre-eminently susceptible of tragic development, and out of this conviction arose the tragedy of 'Hamlet.' Claudius is Ægistheus, Gertrude is Clytemnestra, Hamlet just returned from abroad is Orestes, and Horatio is Pylades. In the Greek poet there is no love save of that dignified and exalted kind which subsists between brother and sister, for Electra stands in the place of Ophelia, except that her consuming energy transcends the utmost conception of the Danish maiden. When Shakespeare had shadowed forth this plan in his mind, he was too full of genius and original resources to sink into the character of an imitator; but he could only escape this by making some of his principal personages tame and insipid, while the chief actor, like Aaron's serpent, swallows up the rest.

The warlike majesty of Denmark has just returned, like Agamemnon, from foreign wars, when his brother

and Queen compass his destruction; but instead of making Gertrude a high-souled, fierce, impassioned, reckless assassin, like Clytemnestra, Shakespeare represents her as a puny, mawkish adulteress, who, through her own base passions, becomes subservient to the lust of a man still baser and more worthless, since, while he exhibits not even the semblance of any virtue, she, in the depths of the Circean sty, preserves the love of a mother for her son. This modification in her character necessitated a modification in that of Hamlet. Clytemnestra has quenched in her heart a mother's love, otherwise Orestes, in spite of every other motive, could not have slain her; and the modern Orestes, who by all forms of intelligence, both natural and supernatural, might have been expected to become a matricide upon learning the real circumstances of his father's murder, is withheld from the fulfilment of that part of his design by the peremptory injunctions of his father's spirit:

Let not thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven
And to the thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her.

From this it is clear that Hamlet's father discerned in his son's mind ideas which might have resulted in the death of both the guilty individuals. Assuming the truth of the historical event commemorated, Æschylus has no choice, but must make Orestes kill his mother; but Shakespeare, finding the whole field of tradition left open to him, exhibits superior art in making accident, not her son, the instrument of Gertrude's punishment. He kills the Danish Ægistheus, as was right, but only in that disastrous mêlée the production of which Shakespeare thought necessary

to rouse the sluggish sympathies of northern audiences. In tragic pomp and grandeur of sentiment *Æschylus* is not merely superior to Shakespeare, but may be said to stand on an unapproachable elevation, though events and circumstances in his dramas are too hurried and abrupt to afford any but the most subtle minds leisure to take in and reflect all their sublimity. Shakespeare, with the calmness of immense power, contemplates the elements before him, and educes out of the mass an intelligible, if not a perfect, whole, invested with broken fragments of grandeur, but interspersed with far too much of what is mean and poor.

The plan of 'Hamlet' is confused and inartistic. Commencing with the utmost splendour, but diminishing in brilliance as it proceeds, growing by degrees flat and tame, and terminating miserably, I cannot therefore fall into the received opinion that Shakespeare carefully revised the play when his mind was at its maturity. He altered it, no doubt, and made several additions, but never gave it his full consideration; otherwise we should not now find in it those blemishes and imperfections which mar its beauty. Few, I fancy, have heard or read the play without being struck by the fact that Shakespeare, when he sketched the character of *Polonius*, meant to make it one thing, which for awhile he does make it, but, gradually losing sight of his original design, he takes up with another theory, and ends by making it something totally different.

If we accept the poet's views we must assume the elder Hamlet to have been that rare being, a prudent king, of which he would naturally give proof by choosing an able man for his minister. Now he chose

Polonius, who managed through a long series of years the public affairs of Denmark, in peace and war. He could not during that period have been a fool, or the king must have been a fool to employ him. But we have the testimony of the younger Hamlet to prove that the elder was a man of judgment, virtue, and large policy, who could not have entrusted the administration of his kingdom to a shallow babbler, such as Polonius soon after the opening of the play appears to be. Into this inconsistency Shakespeare was betrayed by the rage for mixing up comedy with tragedy which possessed him when he wrote 'Hamlet.'

Upon the vexed question of Hamlet's madness I shall only say that, as Shakespeare himself has not made up his mind on the point, but fluctuates throughout between two opinions, we may fairly leave the matter undecided. At the outset Hamlet undoubtedly declares—assuming himself then to be of sound mind—that he means to simulate madness, in order to fulfil some design which he does not explain. It may be suspected, however, that by persistently throwing his mind into a doubtful and unhinged state he destroyed its poise, and became what he pretended. Certainly we are constrained to come to some such decision, or we must accuse Shakespeare's philosophic hero of mean and deliberate falsehood. Being about to engage with Laertes in a conflict of doubtful character and issue, Hamlet, troubled by the bitter memory of Polonius's death, endeavours thus to explain away the guilt of the deed :

Give me your pardon, sir ; I've done you wrong ;
But pardon 't, as you are a gentleman.
This presence knows,
And you must needs have heard, how I am punished

With sore distraction. What I have done,
 That might your nature, honour, and exception
 Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
 Was 't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet:
 If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
 And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
 Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.
 Who does it, then? His madness. If 't be so,
 Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged;
 His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

Here the prince certainly alludes to the death of Laertes' father as one of the sinister actions by which he had done signal injustice to the young nobleman, his other principal offence consisting in having by his policy and behaviour driven his sister Ophelia to insanity and death. From the guilt of these deeds he would now escape by shifting it to the disorder which privately to his friend Horatio he admitted to be a mere sham. So likewise to his mother, whom he has been reproaching with her crimes, he affirms himself to be in perfect health. Speaking aloud to the ghost, which remains invisible to her, she exclaims:

Alas, he's mad!

As he is not aware that she does not discern the spectre or hear its voice, he asks:

Do you see nothing there?

And she replies:

Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.

He goes on:

Nor did you nothing hear?

Queen. No, nothing but ourselves.

Ham. Why, look you there, look how it steals away!

My father in his habit as he lived!

Look where he goes even now at the portal!

This is the very coinage of your brain,
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in.

Ham. Ecstasy!
My pulse as yours doth tempestately keep time,
And makes as healthful music: it is not madness
That I have uttered: bring me to the test,
And I the matter will reword, which madness
Would gambol from. Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.

It appears to me all but certain that 'Hamlet' in the way I have described springs out of the cycle of ancient art. The principles of art are nothing if they do not harmonise with the corresponding principles in nature—that is, if Nature makes men and women in one way

and you represent them in another, your pictures are necessarily false. Now no truth can be more thoroughly established than this : that all sane men are guided in what they do by some theory or other of self-interest. In following this guidance they also think that they are performing a duty, since by entrusting to a man not only the care of his being, but of his well-being, Nature obviously demands of him the fulfilment of this duty to the uttermost. When, therefore, in the recesses of his own heart a man forms for himself a plan of life, he cannot consistently with sanity form other than what appears to him a rational plan, and, if rational, then just and therefore defensible in all its parts, according to the view which in his inner consciousness he takes of it.

Compare this theory of human action with the character of Iago in the tragedy of 'Othello.' He is the corner-stone of the play, which, without him, would have no colour or interest. He plans it, gives impulse to its action, settles the part to be played by every individual in it, and provides for the form of the catastrophe to all but himself. He is, indeed, so intent throughout on compassing the destruction of others that he loses sight of his own safety, and, like Samson in the temple of Dagon, is crushed by the fabric which he has shattered and overthrown. To the proceedings of such a man a motive that shall appear adequate to his keen-sightedness is unquestionably necessary. But has Shakespeare provided Iago with such a motive? In my opinion he has, though it is not that which the Ancient puts forward in his colloquy with Roderigo. Instead of being the able, thoughtful, calculating individual which he is generally supposed to be, he would deserve to be regarded as a shallow and reckless

villain if the mere temporary defeat of his hopes of preferment were the sole incentive to his deadly scheme of revenge. But he knows that this shallow pretence will suffice for the 'poor trash of Venice,' with whom he has to deal; and in any circumstances he could not have brought himself to bare the secret source of torture, which really urged him into action. The pollution of his wife is the last thing a man will reveal to another man, especially such a one as Roderigo appears to Iago. Yet it is this injury, coupled with other slights and disparagements, that constitutes Iago's motive for what he projects; and, while acting under its impulse, he cannot regard the steps he takes as otherwise than justifiable. Shakespeare is not true to nature, therefore, in making Iago condemn his own conduct, while still persisting in it, and exclaim:

Knavery's plain face is never seen till used.

There is nothing unreasonable in assuming that Iago loved Emilia when he chose her to be his wife, and, if so, he could have suffered no greater injury from Othello than his seduction of the woman he loved. If we treat the incidents of the play as facts, it signifies nothing whether Othello had been guilty of Emilia's debasement or not. If circumstances on which his acute mind could rely justified Iago in his conclusions,

Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmation strong
As proofs from holy writ.

Iago, with some reservation perhaps, believes the damning fact, and resolves to risk his all in taking revenge for it. While he is pondering on the position in which he stands—on his degradation, real or

imaginary, on the means at his command of inflicting punishment on his foes—the thought strikes him that he may best effect his purpose through Desdemona ; and his mind, reasoning with itself, proceeds thus. Having come to the conclusion that Cassio loves Desdemona, he says :

I do love her too,
Not out of absolute lust, though peradventure
I stand accountant for as great a sin,
But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leaped into my seat : the thought whereof
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards ;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am even with him, wife for wife.

To a mind brought by circumstances into this state everything which promises to further its designs must appear justifiable. Others may condemn him, but in the court of his own conscience he stands absolved, since, writhing under a wrong the greatest that a man can suffer, he necessarily looks upon his wronger as a detestable object of vengeance. It is not natural, therefore, to make Iago speak of the Moor as of a free and open nature, which if he stooped to stain the bed of his dependant he could not be. But the hearer or reader, it may be said, does not believe in Othello's transgression, and looks upon Iago as a remorseless miscreant. Be it so. Neither the reader nor the hearer is Iago, who, in his turn, cannot be expected to judge of his own actions and intentions as others do. He does and must think himself right for the reasons already stated, and therefore the following language in his mouth is unnatural :—

The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so ;

And will as tenderly be led by th' nose,

As asses are.

I have 't—it is engendered : Hell and night

Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

In drawing another of his villains Shakespeare oversteps the modesty of nature, and produces a monster, which, unless among lunatics, knows no parallel in nature—I mean Richard III. The play opens with a very striking speech, in which Richard dissects himself internally and externally, in a style of fiendish humour, which, though out of keeping with nature, tells upon the stage. Compared with Iago, Richard appears somewhat of a clumsy villain, partly perhaps because he wields greater social power, and is therefore more reckless in the exercise of his malignity, but chiefly because, instead of devising one subtle scheme of atrocity and developing it completely, he surrounds himself like a human spider with a widespreading web of destructiveness, in which he skilfully entangles one victim after another. But his contrivances smell too much of the playhouse. He breaks upon us at first as one who is meant to fret and strut his hour upon the stage, not as a prince with statesmanlike views overthrowing those who stand in his way, because they do so stand, but for the mere caitiff pleasure of killing. The scene with Lady Anne, suggested by the story of the Ephesian Matron, is a mere stage exhibition, tragicomic in its conception, and calculated to suggest a hateful opinion of women, but so overdrawn as to be counteracted by its own extravagance. The men whom Richard cuts off fall into his nets with provoking facility, while the women, both old and young, assail each other with a coarse bitterness which borders on the ludicrous. So much space, however, is wasted by

these uncongenial displays that the catastrophe, with its immediate preliminaries, is almost necessarily hurried, and therefore less effective than it might otherwise have been. The play exhibits no characters of any mark except Richard himself, who removes every obstacle in his way so easily that we are never led to admire either his policy or his power. Some romance is sought to be thrown about Richmond, and there is excitement and poetry in the night scenes on Bosworth field; but the play, upon the whole, is a tedious catalogue of painful incidents, not in many cases necessary for the success of the arch-villain, and only introduced for the purpose of heightening the tragic effect, which they on the contrary diminish. One calamitous story invented with judgment, skilfully protracted, and terminating in a striking manner, as in 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Othello,' fulfils the design of tragedy; but when we are marched through a whole gallery of horrors, we become gradually accustomed to the scenes, our feelings are paralysed, and we witness the termination with apathy—it is the difference between a terrible murder and a battle.

ESSAY IV

TRAGEDY

SOME writers are of opinion that Shakespeare's genius culminated in the tragedy of 'Lear,' the foundation of which, as I have already remarked, he borrowed from antiquity. The play certainly abounds with passages of surpassing beauty, while some of the characters are drawn with a masterly hand, and finely discriminated; but, upon the whole, probability is lost sight of so entirely, and the manners are so little in harmony with nature, that we appear almost throughout to be transported into a world wholly different from our own—a sort of Utopia of horror, where it would be vain to look for anything co-ordinated according to the nature with which we are acquainted. Prospero, and the son of Sycorax, and the three bearded old ladies who meet us on the Scottish heath, are scarcely more out of harmony with the existing system of things. Lear, whom we soon learn to encircle with our compassion, traverses, from the outset, the region of madness, though he becomes more and more engulfed as he proceeds, till his understanding suffers a complete collapse, and he is left helpless and desolate, like a helmless bark upon the ocean.

While this process is accomplishing, his resemblance to Œdipus becomes at every advance more obvious. The Theban king has been expelled from his dominions

by his unnatural sons, whom he from time to time bans with terrific curses ; and Lear, suffering the same indignity and ingratitude, bursts forth into maledictions no less fearful and hideous, though in language more awful and heartsearching than that which the Greek poet has put into the mouth of the regal exile.

Sophocles himself, it will scarcely be denied, has overstepped the modesty of nature in the character of Eteocles and Polynices, as well as in that of Creon ; but Edmund, Goneril and Regan are so far from the human type that they move in an orbit apart, which nowhere touches on our sympathy. Two courses of action run parallel throughout the play, and really constitute two tragedies which challenge your attention simultaneously. Immense power is no doubt displayed in the development of each, but the division of interest interferes with the current of our emotion, and constrains us to slight the sufferings of Gloucester, which, taken separately, would be more than enough to make up a heartrending tragedy.

From time to time throughout the play revolting cruelty and disgust are substituted for terror, which is the proper element of tragedy: the tearing out of Gloucester's eyes, the hanging of Cordelia and the fool, the old king rushing upon the stage with the dead body of his daughter in his arms—these exceed the limits of pathos, and are too painful to be consistent with art. On the other hand, the characters of Lear, Edgar, Gloucester, Kent, and the fool are generally made to develop themselves in a way to command our belief in their humanity. No doubt the old king begins his course by an exhibition of the despotism of dotage, which would excite not our pity, but our scorn, did not a retribution disproportioned to his folly and tyranny

follow closely upon the heels of his offence. That he ought not to escape chastisement we feel. His exercise of his pampered authority, his fantastic selfishness which blinds him to the true character of those around him, his proneness to furious anger, his capricious extravagance, his insatiable vanity, must necessarily bear fruit ; but when his violent passions collapse and he stands before us invested with nothing but the helplessness of age, goaded and oppressed by the savage barbarity of ingratitude, all we have of tenderness and compassion in our nature is instantly awakened and accorded to the sufferer. Shakespeare himself experienced from circumstances the wrongs inflicted upon Lear by his daughters. For intellectual power, richness of thought, exuberant fancy, prolific imagination, and that keensightedness which enabled him to penetrate into the qualities of mankind, he saw no peer among his contemporaries, whom yet he found himself condemned to amuse by tricks and arts which he despised. Thrust away from the high places of human action to wander over the wild heaths of poverty and social degradation, his soul took up arms against the injustice of fortune, which he assailed with all the bitterness of revenge through the mouth of Lear. Hence the splendour of the old king's madness. The writer's soul was in his words, and under cover of acted aberration of intellect he hurls the bolts of his wrath against those institutions, manners, prejudices, which combined to abase him.

In other moods of mind Shakespeare fixed almost at haphazard upon a different class of subjects through which to express his fluctuating views of life. No one can fail to perceive that wherever he may lay the scene of his dramas, the sentiments, feelings, and manners

are substantially English when they are not the offspring of his own fancy. Nothing is really Greek, Roman, Italian, or French, save that a few names and associations are here and there thrown in, with the design of imparting a foreign aspect to the composition. Nor is this characteristic at all peculiar to Shakespeare; the Greek tragedians, when they endeavoured to draw pictures of the heroic age, failed to escape from the system of thought and feeling predominant in their own time, and in point of fact made Teucer, Ajax, and Philoctetes contemporaries with Pericles and Cleon. Plautus and Terence were still less able to revivify Greek characters among the foldings of the Seven Hills, so that Chremes and Glycera are wholly indebted for their idiosyncrasies to the mental atmosphere breathed by their poetical creators. On this ground, therefore, we need not quarrel with Shakespeare, who, of whatever else he may have been ignorant, thoroughly understood the aim and object of all art—namely, to fill the mind with pleasurable sentiments and emotions.

Aristotle and other philosophers desirous of attributing an ethical purpose to the drama, which it may have had in the hands of some poets, maintain that its object is to elevate and purify the minds of men by providing an innoxious outlet for their passions. Without controverting this theory, we may affirm that the principal object of all art is pleasure, first to the artist himself, and next to those who contemplate his performances. In tragedy, pleasure is obtained through pain; that is through a series of emotions which wring the heart, but terminate ultimately by exciting profound admiration and delight at the skill by which all the powers of our mind have been called into action.

Weak and common natures are excited and agitated by trifles, which satisfy their craving after pleasure, and, where the perceptive power is imperfect, works analogous in character will obtain as much, or perhaps more, approbation than such as approach much nearer to perfection. For this reason many audiences derive as much satisfaction from the representation of 'Coriolanus' or 'Richard the Third' as from that of 'Romeo and Juliet' or 'Macbeth.' In Caius Marcius, the conqueror of Corioli, Shakespeare, exaggerating Plutarch, has presented us with a picture of pride and savage insolence calculated to inspire none but the vulgar with sympathy; and, were we not otherwise made familiar with the tender and refined qualities of the poet's mind, we should be tempted to imagine that he cherished some partiality for this patrician gladiator. In 'The Rape of Lucrece' Shakespeare throws the whole force of his intellect into a pleading for the popular cause, but in 'Coriolanus' he appears to side with the cause of power against right, and to throw scorn and contempt on the efforts of the people's advocates to establish liberty in Rome.

The scenes, however, in which he pursues this design are as flat and ineffective as the warlike scenes are extravagant. Scarcely anything in the play is natural, except those passages in which the affections of the mother and son, of the wife and husband, transport us from the dull politics of caste into the domains of pure nature.

Shakespeare knew little of the Roman polity, and had not reflected that it was at least as much the commonalty as the patricians of the Eternal City that by its virtue conquered the world. It is painful, therefore, in a high degree to observe a mind such as

Shakespeare's labouring to represent the greatest people known to history in war and policy as a mutinous and senseless rabble, spurned by a military Bobadil and schooled by an antiquated buffoon. Nothing heavier or more lugubrious than the greater part of this play can easily be conceived, especially as the true spirit of poetry is almost as completely absent as sympathy with Roman greatness or knowledge of Roman character.

'Julius Cæsar,' though deformed by many similar defects, rises, it is well known, far above 'Coriolanus.' There, however, as in many modern novels, the hero is the least heroic of the personages represented. Cæsar, indeed, is made to rant intolerably, but neither does nor says anything great throughout the play. He busies himself with Calpurnia's dreams, struts about in his nightgown, at one moment expresses contempt for the senate, at another is wheedled by one of the conspirators into a change of resolution; now he talks childishly with Antony about the means of curing his wife's barrenness, then he boasts of his own fixedness of purpose, though he had immediately before been giving proofs of the utmost possible instability and caprice. At a moment of supreme danger he prates of loving to have fat and long-haired men about him, and then, thrown off his guard by a mistaken blast of popular applause, invites his idolaters, in the style of a gladiator, to cut his throat, which he furiously bares for the purpose; presently his rage throws him into a fit, which, had fortune been propitious, might have forestalled the swords of Brutus and Cassius.

Shakespeare, in short, misunderstood the character of Cæsar, and therefore failed to put him on the stage. He was possessed by the instinctive persuasion that the man was great, and makes those about him talk of his

greatness, but had not formed a true conception of it himself. The play would have been a better play had Cæsar been invested with all his real virtues and vices, his affected clemency and real ferocity, his admiration for virtue and his passion for vice, his love of country and his resolution to enslave that country. Among recent writers, Mommsen and Louis Napoleon attempted the same deification with still less success than Shakespeare, and in proportion as history is studied will this accomplished despot be less and less esteemed.

However, the interest of Shakespeare's play attaches less to Cæsar than to Brutus, though in the exhibition of his character also Shakespeare gives proof of an inclination to interpret Plutarch's narrative to his disparagement. The biographer tells us that inflammatory placards were pasted on the statue of Junius Brutus and otherwise brought to the notice of Marcus ; but Shakespeare represents Cassius, his brother-in-law, playing upon Brutus's vanity, and stimulating him to assassinate Cæsar, by papers thrown in at his window. In this way he is lowered in the estimation of the audience as one who is actuated, in some degree at least, by meaner motives than love of country and hatred of despotism. But Cassius, who had married Brutus's sister Julia, had ample opportunities of exerting otherwise than by such means whatever influence he possessed over Brutus. In truth, however, the way in which their names are coupled by history expresses their places in the conspiracy. We nowhere read of Cassius and Brutus, but of Brutus and Cassius—that is, the leader and the follower, the greater and the lesser man. Afterwards Shakespeare recovers himself, and restores Brutus to his true place in the tempestuous events of the times. Even his worst enemy, Antony, is con-

strained by conscience to give him the first place among the conspirators:—

This was the noblest Roman of them all.

His life was gentle; and the elements
So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, This was a man!

Unlike 'Coriolanus,' this play is full of exquisite poetry, of delicate sentiments, and of the highest kind of eloquence. Among women there are few on record who for beauty of soul and all-absorbing love can be compared with the wife of Brutus, all whose sweetness, tenderness, and truth are brought forth in comparatively few lines by Shakespeare.

History embalms the memory of Brutus and Cassius together, and Tacitus, the greatest of Rome's historians, relates a circumstance belonging to the period of the Empire which shows with what love and reverence the people looked back to these two names long after the republic had perished. When on a festival day the images of illustrious statesmen and warriors were borne in procession through the streets of the city, the Romans, says the historian, gazed far more at the gap where the statues of Brutus and Cassius should have been than at all the rest of the procession put together.

The tragedy of 'Antony and Cleopatra,' which Coleridge thought a formidable rival to 'Macbeth,' enables Shakespeare to excite sympathy for the worst of the Triumvirs. The character of Antony, with its dash and energy, its recklessness, its licentiousness, its unprincipled extravagance, its puerile servility to a courtesan, was well enough calculated to shine on an unscrupulous stage. He had been made to figure

successfully in 'Julius Cæsar,' he had neutralised the harangue of Brutus in the forum, and had, indeed, in conjunction with Octavius and Lepidus, blighted the fair fruit of the conspiracy. The friends of freedom, however, being dead, its enemies soon began to put forth their stings against one another; having deluged the streets of Rome with the blood of its noblest citizens, Octavius and Antony gave vent to their mutual jealousy and hatred, which form the subject of this play. In the ancient tragedies, where fate puts forth its hand most visibly, the wicked are not at once checked in their wickedness, but, while chastisement is preparing, run gaily through their allotted cycle. So in Shakespeare, the sanguinary libertine who devoted his hours, as an angry Roman expresses it, 'to cool a gypsy's lust,' revels on the banks of the Nile as if no sleepless and inexorable antagonist watched his movements from the vantage ground of the Capitol.

Octavius, however, though successful, and contrasting favourably in many respects with Antony, excites in Shakespeare's play as little admiration as in history. The spirit and life of the play are involved in Cleopatra. Pope's fancy about Shakespeare's correct painting of ancient character and manners nowhere meets with a more complete refutation than in this play, for nothing is Roman or Egyptian but the names. Catherine the Second, and Messalina, might as well as any other courtesan have supplied the original of the heroine of this play, who bears but a slight resemblance to the historical Cleopatra. In the amount of ethical delinquency Shakespeare's Egyptian queen may not be more than a match for the real widow of Ptolemy, but in manners there is as little resemblance as between the queen and her cook. The interest of the play consists

more in the assemblage of ideas, in the strange suggestiveness, in the metaphysical problems, in the subtle superstitions inherent in the human mind, which are inwrought with the adventures of Antony and Cleopatra. In spite of their antecedents, however, they awaken interest and sympathy when, stripped of pomp and station, they draw, as two mere human beings, towards their end. Their vices, and even their crimes, are forgotten; and the shadow of death as it falls over them conceals the sources of our indignation, while it augments the force of our pity.

Another class of Shakespeare's tragedies consists of plays founded on the history of England. Properly speaking, 'Lear,' 'Cymbeline,' 'Hamlet,' and 'Macbeth' belong to this series, though, like the Greek dramas, they are based on the mythical portion of history. When we pass from 'Macbeth' to 'King John,' we feel that we have emerged from the poet's own domain, the world of myth and fiction, to a region in which historical truth, if it can be so called, is just sufficient to cramp the genius of the poet without offering any equivalent in a strict adherence to facts. There is no student of Shakespeare, I believe, who does not regret that he should have devoted so much time and pains to these dreary compositions, which, in spite of many brilliant and exciting scenes, defy the patience of all but professional readers; I say professional, because they who undertake to write of Shakespeare must of necessity peruse all he has written—good, bad, or indifferent.

If Shakespeare had any other design in this series than to make money, it must surely have been to show the English people to what worthless individuals the public affairs had been entrusted, from the murderer

of young Arthur of Bretagne down to the assassin of Anne Boleyn. John everybody hates and despises ; much the same thing may be said of Richard the Second. Henry the Fourth is an able but unprincipled tyrant ; Henry the Fifth, the best man in this regal procession, gives his name to the worst play ; Henry the Sixth, of whom we hear a great deal too much, escapes the fangs of the French she-wolf only to be gored by the boar of York ; having from birth till death awakened alternately our contempt and pity, he is murdered by Richard, who ‘bustles’ through his career of crime with jovial recklessness, to make way for the last malefactor in Shakespeare’s list, Elizabeth’s tyrannical father and Mr. Froude’s hero.

How much or how little of these plays Shakespeare himself wrote is matter of no great moment, since they are less to be regarded as poetical works than, to borrow Coleridge’s happy phrase, ‘bread and cheese’ productions. Yet throughout these historical plays we find a multitude of lines and passages equally remarkable for their imaginative beauty and the wisdom they contain, and it is these incidental portions of the dramas that render the reading of them tolerable, and ensure them a reception by posterity. In ‘Richard the Second,’ which opens with the mouthing extravagance of Norfolk and Hereford, we meet with a political passage which, in the minds of Milton and the younger Vane, must have taken rank with Samuel’s republican discourse to the Israelites. It is Richard himself who thus speaks :

For God’s sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings :
How some have been deposed ; some slain in war ;

Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed ;
Some poison'd by their wives ; some sleeping kill'd ;
All murder'd : for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king !
Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence : throw away respect,
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while :
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends : subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king ?

The tragedy of 'Richard the Third' held possession of the stage long after the other plays of this class had been expelled from it by the improved taste and diminished patience of the public. It is certainly tragic enough to satisfy the most voracious appetite for horrors : murder follows murder with breathless rapidity ; the jocose royal assassin, who in a former play had dismissed Henry the Sixth and the Prince of Wales to their account, begins this tragedy by the slaughter of his brother Clarence, and then goes on with the coolness of a butcher, killing one inconvenient friend or relative after another, till our memory becomes perplexed by the attempt to recall the names of his victims. An interest kept up by such means can hardly be thought very artistic, but this interest is kept up from the opening of the play till its close,

when the scoffing regal criminal makes his exit in a blaze of intrepidity.

The merit of the play consists almost entirely in its ceaseless action ; there is no room for plot properly so called ; there is no opposition of characters, no doubtful contest between man and man, no balancing of probabilities, no predominance of great qualities. Richard is a ruthless destroyer who tells us in his first speech what he means to do, and does it with as much celerity as the necessity of having so many acts and scenes to make up a play will permit. The hero divulges the secret of his own character with still less reserve than Iago, and is to that extent more irreconcilable with nature. If, as he boasts, he had a tongue which could wheedle the devil, he must have possessed an art of sophistry which would have sufficed to wheedle his own conscience.

In the soliloquy, however, he makes disclosures which no man in communion with himself could make. If the Lancastrian hatred of Hall and other chroniclers might indulge in base caricatures of this fierce king, the taste and judgment of Shakespeare should have preserved him from becoming the dupe of their prejudices or venal indignation. If we are to accept the account which Shakespeare himself gives of Richard's energy, daring, and prowess in the field, we must reject as a mere libel the picture which he is made to draw of himself, especially the fable about his withered arm :

I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass ;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph ;
I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,

Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them.

Here Richard must be supposed to say what he thinks, but in the following speech delivered in the Council he makes full use of the rhetorician's privilege :

Behold mine arm
 Is, like a blasted sapling, wither'd up :
 And this is Edward's wife, that monstrous witch,
 Consorted with that harlot strumpet Shore,
 That by their witchcraft thus have marked me.

This, however, is what the poet says of the cripple, made such by the witchery of the Queen and Shore. Richard is at Bosworth, his last field, where the withered arm is forgotten, while its owner scarcely encounters a warrior among the Lancastrians equal to cope with his strength and valour. An eye-witness thus describes his achievements :

The king enacts more wonders than a man,
 Daring an opposite to every danger :
 His horse is slain, and all on foot he fights,
 Seeking for Richmond in the throat of death.

Richard himself closes the recital of his warlike acts :

I think there be six Richmonds in the field ;
 Five have I slain to-day instead of him.

Whately and John Kemble once discussed solemnly, as a subject of much importance, the question whether Richard or Macbeth were the braver man. It would have been less difficult to decide which of them, as exhibited by Shakespeare, is the better man, for while

the Crookback commands not a particle of sympathy except on Bosworth Field, the assassin of Duncan, in spite of his ferocity, is regarded with a certain amount of kindly feeling. The reasons perhaps may be that, as he is the object of a woman's love, we necessarily give him credit for all such qualities as beget love in a woman; while he is contemplated also as being in a great degree made what he is by spherical predominance, or what Edmund's audacious language denominates 'a divine thrusting on.'

ESSAY V

TREATMENT OF THE COMIC ELEMENT

THOUGH none of the historical plays can be regarded simply as a comedy, it is nevertheless in them that Shakespeare displays his comic power with most brilliance and success. When his object was to produce a mere comedy, the prospect of having to strain his genius up to a theoretical point of humour or drollery throughout the whole piece damped his inventive powers, or drove him to the adoption of semi-tragic contrivances for the production of contrast and variety. The concurrence of many able critics produced a conviction in the eighteenth century that Shakespeare's genius was essentially comic, so that he wrote against the grain when tragic elements were his theme. Johnson especially argued after this fashion :

In tragedy Shakespeare often writes with great appearance or toil and study what is written at last with little felicity, but in his comic scenes he seems to produce without labour what no labour can improve.

His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct.

The exact contrary of this appears to be the fact. His genius in comedy takes, like the flying fish, short flights, whereas when tragedy is his theme his ideas mould themselves naturally into forms of terror or absorbing woe, though at times rents in the pall of

gloom reveal the presence of the spirit of comedy in the background. Shakespeare has written no comedy that can rank as a play with 'Romeo and Juliet' or 'Macbeth.' The reason is, or may be, that Shakespeare's life was rather a tragedy than a comedy, a life of struggle, of anxiety, of apprehension, and, though success came at last to crown his toils, it crowned them but for a moment as—

The world's comforter, with weary gait,
His day's hot task had ended in the west.

We are as a nation serious, earnest, gloomy as our own Novembers, and by the bent of our nature disposed to sympathise with fierceness rather than with gaiety. It is in the endeavour to temper our dispositions that we have recourse to manufactured vivacity, for this is what our lively productions always are. The French, until tyranny and the Revolution sobered them, were gay and lively by nature. Molière was France just as Heracitus and Democritus were Hellas by turns. In the same sense Shakespeare is England, profoundly tragic with flashes of comedy on the surface. Hence our over-boiling energy as a people, now hovering around the ice of the Polar Circle, now ploughing the Equatorial Ocean; now supplying cottons and opium to the luxurious Asiatic; now, in the vile pursuit of gain, maddening the savage with fire-water.

What a vein of mirth and laughter did not Shakespeare open when the plough of his invention turned up Falstaff from the deep soil of his intellect! Some shadowy resemblance of this fat impersonation of licentious wit had flitted athwart the stage before Shakespeare's time; but the real man only came forth in Eastcheap when Hal, Nym, Bardolph, and Poins

were attracted at Mrs. Quickly's to revolve about Falstaff's bulk as planets about the sun.

No doubt the serious portions of 'Henry the Fourth' are finely written, and as a whole instinct with poetry, but they would fail to link us to the play without the comic adjunct. This is the part of Shakespeare which Johnson had in his mind when he talks of his comedies being instinct, whereas, splendid as it is, full of original imagery and strange combinations of ideas, it is more certainly the result of thought and labour than Juliet's soliloquy when, at sight of the friar's potion, she is screwing her courage to the sticking-place. No one can define wit or say what it is, but it breaks on most minds like a glimpse of sunshine, at once warming and refreshing. The Prince is witty now and then, and even the heavy Bardolph, goaded by his master's assaults, gives utterance at times to smart sayings; but whoever may be the speakers, and whatever may be the topic, it is Falstaff who sheds splendour on the dialogue. He keeps strictly within bounds when he says he is 'not only witty in himself, but the cause that wit is in other men.' Yet his wit is less his attraction than his good nature. You cannot put him out; he bears girdings and rebuffs with the equanimity which Horace attributes to Aristippus.

Volney remarks that travellers are often betrayed into lying by their kindly dispositions, a little stimulated perhaps by vanity; when they perceive that their recitals beget pleasurable emotions in the listeners, their desire to give them still greater pleasure betrays them into exaggeration, through which they easily glide into extravagant fiction. The same process goes on in Falstaff's mind. When he describes, for example, his imaginary combat on Gad's Hill, the number

of his antagonists is at first moderate ; but, fancying he discovers tokens of surprise in his auditors, he rapidly multiplies his foes from three rogues in buckram suits to sixteen. But the mere narration is nothing ; it is in the garnishing, the splendid lies, the outrageous figures of speech, the impudent coolness, the easy audacity with which, when detected, he outfaces his detectors that the delightful humour of the scene consists.

But the difficulty Shakespeare experienced in the attempt to keep up Falstaff to this pitch of comic extravagance is shown by the introduction of Doll Tearsheet, Pistol, and Mrs. Quickly, where mere ribaldry is substituted for wit. So, again, when the Prince and Poins disguise themselves as waiters, the invention falls flat upon the reader or spectator, which Shakespeare himself feels, and therefore hurries as speedily as possible to a conclusion. The scene with Falstaff and the Lord Chief Justice is clever enough, and presents us with some fine conceptions and turns of thought, but it sinks below the level of the Boar's Head dialogues. Falstaff recovers himself a little on Shrewsbury Plain, and gives us here and there throughout the play other fine tastes of his quality ; but his wit seems most at home in Eastcheap.

Afterwards in 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' Falstaff comes forth again in the full blaze of his wit and comic extravagance. This is Shakespeare's best comedy, the most purely English in its character, the best sustained, the most remarkable for that sort of interest which comedy requires, though towards the end it degenerates too palpably into farce. In compositions of this class deep passion of any kind, especially love, would be out of place. Love, in fact, always

stands on the verge of tragedy, always ready, and sometimes even eager, to cope with misfortune to show its power. Still the passion of Fenton and sweet Anne Page is rather too mawkish even for comedy. In other respects the personages of the drama are original and full of interest. Ford, indeed, is too much of a fool, but his folly is perhaps a necessity, and we pardon it accordingly.

Molière is essentially what Johnson imagines Shakespeare to be, a comic writer by nature as well as by taste; but no one save Aristophanes ranges along the high level of Shakespeare's genius, covering grotesque themes with veils of splendour, and really astonishing all who read or listen by the prolific boldness with which he originates startling ideas and wild combinations. Yet there is one characteristic of 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' which detracts considerably from its merit: it is, like 'Don Quixote,' too much indebted for the effect it produces to the heartless infliction of bodily suffering. The Knight of the Rueful Countenance is made rueful by unmerciful buffets and blows; and Falstaff is ducked and cudgelled to excite the merriment of spectators. It may be that he deserves it, but the comedy would have been more delicate and refined had it been evolved from mental inflictions. As it is, he resembles too closely the clown in the pantomime to furnish unqualified enjoyment to a highly civilised age.

Sterne, and perhaps some other writers, look upon 'Much Ado about Nothing' as the finest comedy in our language. It is unquestionably a fine play, but in spite of several laughable scenes it is scarcely, in my opinion, a comedy at all; indeed, it narrowly escapes being a tragedy, and as it is, in spite of all the poet's

efforts, the catastrophe is reached through a series of incidents so pathetic in their nature that we find it impossible to shake off the cluster of tragic emotions by which we have been agitated. I do not mention it as a reproach to Shakespeare, that he borrowed from Ariosto the poor contrivance of Don John for the purpose of blighting Hero's felicity; but it is certainly true that the incident makes a much worse figure in his play than in Ariosto's poem. However brought about, Hero's suffering and humiliation are too real and deep for comedy, and leave in the heart of all the better characters wounds which in actual life would admit of no cure. Hero, after the insults she receives, could not forgive Claudio, still less could she love him, and if a marriage were patched up it would be only one of those contrivances which are so often had recourse to in the vain hope of screening damaged reputations. Claudio's character from beginning to end is poor, and in developing it Shakespeare falls into some of those oversights which may so often be objected to.

Fortune-hunting is no unpardonable offence in a comic hero, but while allowing his paltry motives to peep forth Claudio falls into contradictions for which the poet, not the hero, must be answerable. To free himself from all suspicion of being a romantic lover he inquires of the Prince whether Leonato had a son or not, meaning that if he had he might not consider Hero, in spite of her beauty or virtue, a desirable partner. In another passage, to ward off from his passion the charge which he thinks might be made against it of being too sudden, he says he had known and loved Hero before he went to the wars. But this could not be the case, since had he known the lady he must have known something also of her family, and

would not therefore have needed to inquire whether or not she had a brother. No one can doubt that the scene of this play is laid in Christian times, yet we find the lover, when he thinks he has lost his mistress and her fortune, singing hymns to Diana in a church.

But the tragic heroine is not the real one ; Beatrice, whom we could fancy playing the part of Myrrhina in the grotto of Pan, is the real life of the play ; it is she who with her vivacity and wit makes it a comedy, who tilts with every gentleman she meets, who is outdone by no one in audacious jesting, whose tongue, in fact, recognises no law of decorum or scarcely of modesty, but who, when the time comes for facing the hard trials of life, throws off the mask of merriment, and proves herself to be a right noble lady, with a soul as much alive to truth and honour as if she had never perpetrated a wild jest. It is she and her lover Benedick who give a character to 'Much Ado about Nothing,' though the stratagem by which they are assumed to be brought together be somewhat too transparent and farcical. Bishop Wordsworth, in the book he has written 'On Shakespeare's Use of the Bible,' makes no mention, I believe, of Claudio's quotation from Genesis, which he would probably have felt himself constrained to call profane—'Moreover God saw him when he was hid in the garden.' If there be wit in this, I confess myself unable to discover it, though the incident to which the speaker makes reference be obvious enough.

Dogberry and his companions who figure in this play are no doubt amusing, but it is in the style of broad farce, not of comedy. Again, though Don John be a shiftless villain, he might be expected to employ a less idiotic agent than Borachio, who babbles like a

drunken cobbler about the stratagem by which Hero's fortunes are blighted for a time, as we are expected to interpret events, but for ever if we allow nature and experience to decide.

'Twelfth Night' is more thoroughly a comedy than 'Much Ado about Nothing.' It has several original characters: Viola, Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, the Duke, Orsino, and even Olivia, whose extreme wantonness distinguishes her from the most forward of Shakespeare's heroines.

Malvolio also is an original character, though in the development of his peculiarities Shakespeare is scarcely consistent. He is called a Puritan, but has none of those qualities by which Puritans differentiated themselves from their neighbours. He is not a stern enthusiast, but a piece of starched propriety, who imagines himself attractive, and believes his mistress to be in love with him, while he secretly despises her for deriving amusement from the babble of a barren fool. The tricks played on this man at the instigation of Maria have no doubt some ingenuity in them, though they can hardly be said to have much merit. One scene in the garden, where he picks up a letter so worded as to create in him the belief that the Countess is in love with him, enables Shakespeare to indulge in that licence which characterises the comedy of the period. A clever actor often makes a hit by working out the intention of the poet in this incident, where, dwelling on the style of her handwriting, he calls up by his solemn trifling a swarm of indecent ideas without being at all conscious of the result.

I have said that the Duke is an original character, which he is rendered by the mixture of simplicity, innocence, gentleness, and fondness with which he seeks

the love of Olivia, which he fortunately loses, while he gains that of Viola. It would seem as if the amusement of comedy could seldom be ensured without absurdity. The way in which the Duke obtains a wife and Olivia a husband is so improbable that it almost neutralises the poet's abilities. Viola disguised, and playing the part of the Duke's eunuch, makes love for him to Olivia, who despises the sender, but conceives a passion for the messenger, herself enamoured of the Duke.

While this ridiculous amour is in progress, Sebastian, brother to Viola, and who has been shipwrecked with her, appears upon the scene, is mistaken for his sister by Olivia, and through this error becomes her husband. But was Sebastian of the same stature with his sister? Was he, like her, habited as the Duke's eunuch? Was he so girlish, or she so masculine, that they could not be distinguished one from the other? By overlooking these considerations Shakespeare evidently counts too much on the inattention or indulgence of audiences, which could not be so void of observation as to accept so lame a contrivance for a true picture of life.

One of the calmest and sweetest among Shakespeare's plays is the pastoral of 'As You Like It.' Here, indeed, as elsewhere, we meet with contradictions and oversights, as the education of Orlando by instinct, the lion and the palm tree in a French forest, the wooing of Rosalind as a youth, the moral transformation of Oliver; but these are of so little moment that they scarcely ruffle the current of our poetical emotions. No large picture of life which aims at being a resemblance to the truth of nature can, by whatever hand, be drawn without some admixture of evil elements.

If, however, the evil predominates the result is a tragedy ; but where it is only just sufficient to produce contrast, and is ultimately vanquished by good, we may call the composition by what name we please, but it is what Shakespeare understands by a comedy, meaning by the name a play in which the agreeable predominates over its opposite.

In 'As You Like It' the elder Duke's exile and Oliver's persecution of his younger brother produce the complications necessary to the structure of a dramatic plot. The stream of events enveloping the principal characters hurries them towards one point, where, assembling outside the circle of everyday life, they enjoy the pleasures of a mode of existence analogous to the characteristics of the Golden Age : they hunt, they feast under spreading trees, they lie about and meditate, or make love in the sun on the mossy banks of streams, or house in rustic cottages just roomy enough to accommodate two or three shepherds.

The fool is here of essential service, and, sooth to say, is more at home, seeing that folly more or less modified prevails largely on all sides. Shakespeare, though somewhat too much given to vaunt the force of instinct, is almost sure at the same time to supply a corrective for his philosophical heresy ; if, for example, the strongest of all instincts, that of sex, were unerring in its operations it could not be counteracted by the obstacle of a suit of clothes, which is all that stands between Orlando and Rosalind. So, again, in the case of Phœbe, a suit of clothes kindles her amorous instinct, and makes her prefer a girl disguised before a real masculine lover. But in a composition of this kind we must not look too narrowly into the causes of

our pleasure ; being under the influence of an illusion, which the cold voice of reason would dispel, we had better not invoke its influence, but give up the reins to fancy and dream out our dream to the end.

Shakespeare's Forest of Arden is enchanted ground, where the sunshine of genius streams between the trunks of trees, over the quivering face of brooks, down green glades and hollows, where herds of wild deer frisk and gambol among the thickets. Here, if anywhere, love may be the ruling power ; it was meant, perhaps, to rival Sidney's 'Arcadia,' which, by its exquisite pictures of nature, it eclipses altogether. Touchstone gives us the keynote to the performance. In the ordering of his mode of life he is willing to submit to Civilisation if she will come promptly to his aid ; if not, he will abjure her, and recognise the authority of free nature. His perplexity is about taking a wife, and his logic runs thus : if there be a priest forthcoming he will marry ; if not, he will dispense with the ceremony, and live with Audrey like the other denizens of the wilderness. All the inhabitants of the forest, from the Duke downwards, conform more or less strictly to this system, and hence the indefinable charm which rests upon the whole play. When the repentance of the younger Duke brings in the influence of law and order, the gardens of Irem disappear, and are replaced by the hard realities of a French dukedom.

Hunter is right in tracing the origin of 'The Tempest' to the 'Orlando Furioso,' which has a history and geography of its own. Astolfo's kingdom and Prospero's island are situated in the same quarter of the world, and have nothing to do with Hakluyt or Malte-Brun. Sir John Mandeville himself never visited them, not even when he beheld torrents of

stones rolling down marvellous inclined planes instead of water.¹ One remark may suffice to preface whatever I may have to say of this comedy. It is a creation, not of imagination, but of fancy, where there is much to interest and little to excite; where wonder and curiosity supply the places of manners, passions, and intrigues, for of these there is nothing that deserves the name. How, then, does it happen that 'The Tempest' is both delightful to witness on the stage and interesting to read? Simply because, though it be an extravagance it is the extravagance of genius, invested with a mantle of subtle inventions, of aerial fancies, of a sense of the remote and dreamlike, which, skilfully blended together, transports the mind beyond the precincts of ordinary life and sets it down in a nook of fairyland, not, however, completely removed from the influence of ordinary associations. In accomplishing a feat of this kind art ceases to be the mimic of nature, and, allying itself with fancy, performs its gambols outside the sphere of her domain.

Prospero is not a man but a power, originating no one knows where or how, exerting itself by means of material implements, coercing nature, governing the elements, passing within the sphere of the spiritual world, and regulating there the movements of beings

¹ Sir John Mandeville has been unmercifully criticised on account of the many improbable stories which he introduced into the relation of his travels. The account mentioned in the text, of rivers of stones flowing down an inclined plane, may be explained. Many years ago I visited Bolivia, and there, while standing on an eminence, I saw below me an inclined plane, down which appeared to be gliding a broad river of stones. On approaching nearer and crossing it, I found it was the bed of a mountain torrent, almost level with the surrounding land, dry while we were there, but no doubt a flood when the snows melt, as in the widest parts it must have measured over a quarter of a mile. If Sir John only saw such a scene at a distance, I can account for his mistake.

whose forces transcend ours in variety and subtlety, but are yet made subject to us through the influence of that mysterious art called magic. Among the offspring of fancy Ariel is one of the loveliest. Masculine in sex, it is wedged in a riven oak because it refuses to soil the delicacy of its nature by mingling in love with the witch Sycorax. Shakespeare was familiar with incubi and succubi, with the rest of the unclean brood generated by the superstition of the Middle Ages; but his invention when he required a spiritual agent imaged forth to him a being which, though akin to them by nature, rose altogether above their sphere in character, and displayed a purity like that of the aerial element in which it moved. In this spiritual creature consists the highest beauty and charm of 'The Tempest.' For awhile we consent to forget the laws of nature, and suffer our imagination to be borne into realms over which she holds no sway by the fantastic achievements of this tricky spirit. Through the medium of translations Shakespeare had certainly obtained a glimpse of the aerial superstitions of the Greeks, which peopled the sea, rivers, mountains, meadows, and forests with existences like Ariel, only clothed with superior beauty and made more akin to humanity.

Youths, enslaved by the element of passion in their nature, settled often, we are told, on some nymph or hamadryad which had become visible to the mind rather than to the eye in twilight forests, or amid clouds of foam flakes on the margin of the sea. This passion the Greeks called nympholepsy, and they who were involved in its toils often pined themselves to death. Ariel feels no passion and inspires none, but a soft and exquisite wonder which intoxicates and hurries about

the fancy with beauty and music through the wilds of Shakespeare's Utopia.

We may discover in 'The Tempest,' however interesting and beautiful it may be as a creation of fancy, the danger which men incur when they rove beyond the boundaries of nature. Prospero's magical attributes enable him, we see, to accomplish almost anything; he can pounce upon a ship, hundreds of miles off on the ocean, cause it to pursue what track he pleases, and hurl it in what appears to be irremediable wreck on the rocks of his island. But where were his magical powers while at Milan, and what compelled him to wait so many years for the accomplishment of his vengeance against his enemies? Obviously that Miranda might grow up to be a woman, and engage in the most insipid of love-making with the most insipid of lovers.

To some extent, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' belongs to the same class of plays as 'The Tempest,' though not altogether a fairy tale, because it deals in part with human beings as Shakespeare's youth imagined them. It is built upon the extravagant and the supernatural, so that the action of the play depends much less on the human agents than upon beings existing altogether outside the sphere of humanity. The name describes very correctly the nature of the comedy; it is a dream, a wild sweet dream, and as by the poet's art we are hurried through it we forget that we are not dealing with natural things, but the creations of lawless fancy assumed to belong to the domain of nature.

It would be useless to insist on the fact that Shakespeare does not even attempt to describe the manners prevalent throughout Greece in the heroic

ages; he lays his scene indeed in Attica, and in the poetical part of the comedy makes use of ancient names; but, the world he was best acquainted with being that of his own imagination, he boldly assumes the existence of whatever he requires: Draconian laws, free and easy manners, an improvised theatre, fairies, Amazons, with stage-stricken artisans who supply broad farce for the gallery. The women, Helena and Hermia, are such as may be found everywhere or nowhere; they do not belong to any age or country, but, if they exist, exist exceptionally under exceptional influences. Their feelings are natural, though their manners are the reverse. Assuming them to be ladies, high-born, refined, suitable companions for the Queen of Theseus, they nevertheless act like runaway farm girls, and give way to their primitive instincts as unhesitatingly as if they had lived before Deucalion and Pyrrha. Young women may doubtless feel and think as the heroines of Shakespeare's play do, but, unless among the fair ones of the South Sea Islands, it may be doubted whether their sentiments and passions are ever exhibited so transparently by their language.

The introduction of the fairies, albeit unhellenic, is marvellously beautiful, and diffuses a singular charm over the greater part of this play. Puck is a wonderful creature; inferior to Ariel in delicacy and freedom from earthly tendencies, he is more comic through his fondness for mischief and drollery; he was the precursor of the electric telegraph, boasting that he could put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes—a poetical fancy which science has realised. Nowhere, perhaps, in his plays does Shakespeare crowd in so few lines so great a variety of strange conceptions. To

express extreme rapidity Ariel promises to effect something

Or ere your pulse twice beat.

No words can convey the idea of greater swiftness, yet it is not so picturesque or striking as Oberon's command :

Fetch me this herb ; and be thou here again
Ere the leviathan can swim a league.

Shakespeare had possibly read the story that a whale wounded in the morning on the verge of the Polar Circle was harpooned before nightfall under the Equator. Into the midst of this prehistoric colloquy Shakespeare introduces his famous compliment to Elizabeth :

Oberon. I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
Cupid all arm'd : a certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts ;
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
And the imperial votaress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell :
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.

Upon this passage critics have indulged in protracted speculations which have left the mystery, if there be one, exactly where it was. Halpin contends that by the 'little western flower' Shakespeare means Lettice Knollys, but the lines appear to suggest an innocent though unfortunate passion, whereas, if his opinion be correct, Shakespeare demands our sympathy

and pity for a woman steeped in guilt. When he approached the end of his play Shakespeare began to be uneasy lest the world should imagine that he really believed in fairies ; so, when he had made such use of them as he thought proper, he chose Theseus for his delegate to express his real opinion :

I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.

Shakespeare was full of animal spirits before they had been deadened by the consciousness of those harmful deeds lamented in a sonnet when he wrote 'Love's Labour's Lost'—a comedy brimming over with wit and humour, often, however, neutralised by conceits and outrageous improbabilities. Not an antagonistic idea presents itself throughout the play to disturb the full current of vivacity. All is drollery, mirth, laughter, and sportive trifling, from the pedantic vanity of the King and his nobles down to the ludicrous vaunting of the Spanish cavalier, who is gored by the horns of Moth's wit.

There are here no marked characters, but the rudiments of many that make their appearance afterwards in more highly finished plays : Rosaline is Beatrice, as yet in fancy's cradle, and Biron under the same conditions is Benedick. The four lovers, however, and the four ladies are all cast pretty nearly in the same mould, and may be looked upon rather as materials for future use than as perfectly wrought out figures ; the lower personages supply most amusement, as Costard, Holofernes, Armado, Moth and Jaquenetta. Shakespeare was busily engaged in his studies when

he wrote this play, and it may be inferred from many parts of it that he had shadowed forth in his mind a vast scheme of study, into which, as into a grand mould, his multitudinous and exuberant thoughts afterwards ran. It may be well for his ethical fame that he kept no diary and wrote no confessions, but in many ways it is an incalculable loss to us, since had he been frank we should then have been led into the workshop of the most original and prolific intellect of modern times.

In the early part of his life he found it impossible to restrain his fiery imagination within almost any limits. His greatest tragedy is thickly sown with comic scenes—so thickly indeed that we may be at times in doubt whether we are engaged with a tragedy or a comedy—but when, through the bright sky of wit, humour, and gaiety overhung with the gorgeous clouds and filled with the incense of beauty, the dark vapours of tragedy break in upon the scene, our emotions are rendered only the deeper and more sombre for the brilliance out of which we pass into the gloom. Up to the death of Mercutio the mind scarcely catches a glimpse of a single image akin to suffering or terror; everything is covered with an atmosphere of sunshine and splendour, perfumed with the voluptuous breath of love, intermingled with ideas in swarms and flashes, which sometimes hurry the mind beyond its legitimate limits. Mercutio is incomparably the most comic character in Shakespeare; the fire of youth constantly keeping up his blood at boiling heat, he is unable to restrain himself within the bounds of decency, so that his imagination is constantly giving birth to wild combinations of ideas and sexual imagery. He may be regarded as the incarnation of comedy in its

Aristophanic form, and the all but impossibility of supplying him with a constant succession of jests, pleasantries, ideas, and images suited to his antecedents makes Shakespeare kill him, as Dryden expresses it, since he would otherwise have killed Shakespeare.

Crabb Robinson relates an anecdote apropos of another character in 'Romeo and Juliet': Coleridge, he says, delivering a lecture on the character of the Nurse, became so discursive and garrulous that Lamb whispered sarcastically 'It is after the manner of the Nurse.' Several critics, German and English, take in my opinion a strange view of this character, which seems to me rather a blot than a beauty in the play. No great sagacity is needed to perceive that it is unnatural: only eleven years have elapsed since she weaned Juliet; by her own account of her infirmities she must be hard upon seventy, so that she must have suckled her foster child till near threescore, which is palpably absurd. It may be funny to represent on the stage the weaknesses and follies of age, but then the poet should select conditions in which his picture would be reconcilable with nature, which it obviously is not in the present case. Juliet's mother is quite a young woman, and would doubtless choose for her first-born a nurse not older, but rather younger, than herself, by which reckoning the comic old lady with four teeth, and hobbling about as if on the brink of the grave, would not be above five or six and twenty.

At any rate, the nurse as she is found in the play is simply an impossibility, and cannot therefore be referred to as a proof of Shakespeare's judgment. She is certainly made to say droll things and to elicit still droller things from the unbridled tongue of Mercutio; but she should have been introduced as nurse to Juliet's

mother, at least, if not to her father. I may here notice another slip of the poet. Having been at the pains to inform us that Juliet's mother is only twenty-eight, he loses sight of his own chronology and makes her exclaim :

O me ! this sight of death is as a bell,
That warns my old age to a sepulchre.

If a jury of ladies under thirty were asked to give their verdict on such a representation of woman's life, I think Shakespeare's truth to nature, in this instance at least, would scarcely be allowed. As to Capulet himself, there is no reason to doubt that he is old, though not so decrepit as to require a crutch, which when he calls for his sword his wife recommends to him. However, there is one trait in his character which certainly smacks of dotage : that is his failing to remember whether he has had but one child or many children, for in one place he tells us that God has sent him Juliet only, while in another place he speaks of her as the only one left to him out of several :

Wife, we scarce thought us blest
That God had lent us but this only child.

Act iii. sc. v.

But in Act i. sc. ii. he clearly alludes to his having had other children :

The earth hath swallow'd all my hopes but she.

At any rate, whatever may have been the number of his children, Juliet must be assumed to have been the first, since he married Lady Capulet when she was thirteen, who became Juliet's mother at fourteen. These, it may be said, are trifles, but life is made up in a measure of trifles, which therefore ought not to be overlooked in a picture of life.

ESSAY VI

LICENCE IN THE USE OF LANGUAGE

SHAKESPEARE has often been thought to aim at giving a complete picture of human life, of birth and death, of conception and dissolution, and of all the circumstances and incidents which connect themselves with the vital principle in its progress from the beginning to the end. The ethical theories prevalent in his time, though less cramped than those to which we pay allegiance, obstructed his design, though not so completely but that he has, with more or less clearness, suggested, if he has not described, most of the processes from the consideration of which prejudice and ignorance recoil.

No one as yet knows what man is, how he begins to be or how he ends, what is the object of his existence—that is, what purpose he serves in the creation, what relations he bears to other finite existences, and what to the cause of all existence. What may perhaps be called the poles of speculation, the infinitely great and the infinitely minute, overawe the mind almost equally, for thought is startled and retreats when it attempts to penetrate the fathomless abysses of space, and scarcely if at all less so when it throws its glances on the internal mechanism of man's nature, on the involution of mind in matter, on the germs of being,

on the procession of ideas, on the substance, place, and destiny of the soul, on consciousness and the extent to which the finite is acted on by the infinite.

Proofs are scattered throughout the plays that none of these problems had escaped the investigation of Shakespeare, though he may, nay must, have dwelt less on some than on others. His business lay more with the passions, manners, virtues, and excesses of men than with the inner regions of the intellect; and he sought to ingraft his name on their love by calling up impassioned and endearing pictures in their imaginations, and imprinting glowing trains of thought upon their memories. He cared little for the censure of vulgar minds, and addressed himself through daring symbolisms to the source of all interest in human compositions—the yearning of the soul, strongest in the strongest, after the exercise of all kinds of power—the power of sensual passion no less than that of ambition, or the thirst of dominion over the minds and bodies of men.

Crime, with whatever horrors attended, has in all ages been conceded to the poet as a permissible topic, whereas the sportive sallies, the arts, the stratagems, the reserves and excesses of wantonness, though equally involved in a complete theory of human nature, have been in most ages eliminated from the domain of poetry. Shakespeare rebelled against this decision, and began his career as an author by developing with little or no reserve the wild irregularities of passion. No story of ancient or modern times, at least within the compass of his knowledge, could have supplied him with a more ample field for setting forth his ideas of female passion than that of Venus and Adonis, in relating which, accordingly, he has exhausted

the range of imagery, the pictures of desire, and the fantastic waywardness of sensuality at his command.

Venus in his poem is not so much the seaborne goddess of the mythology, lavishing upon her sex the infinite resources of beauty and incentives to love, as wantonness personified, not malignant and vindictive as in the 'Hippolytus,' but thrust on to the borders of madness, though all the while submissive and entreating by the ungovernable ardour of her own desire. To obtain scope for the fulfilment of his design, Shakespeare could do no other than invert the order of nature, making the weaker woo and the stronger resist. Euripides had already done the same thing in the 'Hippolytus,' but spoiled his picture by making the vindictiveness of the woman terminate in unmitigable baseness. Shakespeare's Venus is free from this stain. Having chosen a cold and coy youth for the object of her love, and experienced from him nothing but neglect and disdain, she yet does not permit her love to change into hatred, but, so far true to the woman in her soul, loves on to the end, even after death has put an impassable gulf between her and the one whose love she coveted.

Marlowe had selected in the loves of Hero and Leander a more beautiful, if not a more prolific, theme, and his treatment of the subject is more delicate, tender, and impassioned. Desire in this case originates, as it should, in the masculine nature, and kindles a corresponding feeling in the female. To outdo this, Shakespeare clearly perceived, would be beyond his power, and he therefore chose a kindred theme, in developing which he might, by transposing the elements, produce a series of exciting situations and glowing pictures. This, it will not be denied, he has

done, though with less consideration for the female character than might have been wished. Taking woman at her warmest, with her passions in a state of effervescence, her blood impetuous, her heart predominant over her brain, he boldly interprets her longings, which, as they augment in force, obliterate all shame, and reveal their existence in language which scarcely knows in literature any parallel. Marlowe conducts passion to its goal with less sacrifice of modesty than Shakespeare suggests by the torturing and reiterated failures of the wanton goddess, who, throwing aside all reserve, seeks to subdue her bashful lover by wild reminiscences of celestial pleasure and alluring pictures of her own charms. Against every art, every temptation, every incentive of nature, every suggestion of opportunity, Adonis shows himself proof, and, to subdue the audacious fair one into modesty, draws two masterly representations of love and licentiousness, and exhorts her by looking on this picture and on this to eschew the worse and choose the better passion :—

Love comforteth like sunshine after rain,
 But Lust's effect is tempest after sun ;
 Love's gentle spring doth always fresh remain,
 Lust's winter comes ere summer half be done ;
 Love surfeits not, Lust like a glutton dies ;
 Love is all truth, Lust full of forged lies.

Numerous passages, situations, incidents in the plays belong to the same category with 'Venus and Adonis,' calling up before the mind similar ideas, desires, blandishments, and expressing them with still less reserve. By this he has exposed himself to the charge of being indelicate, impure, obscene, and immoral. Against such charges there is and can be

but one line of defence, which must lie in the reasons that determined the poet's proceedings. By the exigencies of his art he was required to hold the mirror up to nature—that is, to reflect with more or less exactitude the character and manners of all classes of men, not as they ought to be, but as they are, with all their imperfections on their heads. But he enters, it may be said, with glee and satisfaction into the outbursts of grossness and sensuality, giving them a glib as well as a lawless tongue, as if governed by the persuasion that what they uttered was as much entitled to a hearing as the sweet interpretations of gentle and loving natures.

But is he less earnest, less eloquent, less given up heart and soul to the purpose in hand when the business is to give expression to what is holy, august, and true? When he deals with the outgoings of sorrow, when he paints the pangs of despised love, when he puts before us the mother weeping for her children, the lover joyously inhaling death from the lips of her he loved, old age involved in limitless misery, yet touched with compassion for the naked wretches whom its fancy conjures up; if he is less impressive when dealing with these sanctified trains of thought than when clothing in language the lawless ideas of Mercutio or Iago, let him be condemned without mercy; but if the contrary be the case, let us persuade ourselves that he had a heart large enough to take into itself our entire humanity, with all its frailties, and could sympathise with it as well when it is joyous and lawless, as when it is serious or sad.

By this I do not mean to defend every form of expression employed by Shakespeare, who has, I confess,

sometimes overstepped the modesty of nature and revelled in the use of phrases and figures of speech scarcely justified by the position or idiosyncrasy of the speakers. I allude especially to the unsavoury style of Thersites, who grovels somewhat needlessly and with inveterate preference in the filthiest of sties. The poet himself, too, if the Sonnets be his, approaches much too nearly the same unclean subject, no matter what may have been his motive or the end he had in view. The field of licit delight is large enough for the most grasping imagination, and the experience of all ages shows that to transgress its limits is not only objectionable in an ethical point of view, but irremediably blighting to the fancy, which recoils with cool abhorrence from everything not commended to our acceptance by the kindest mother of us all.

Shakespeare could not in all cases have had living antitypes for the wits and reprobates, the hoydens, scolds and viragoes who figure among his dealers in lawless licence. To the utmost extent of his experience he drew from what he saw and heard, but for many varieties of character he must have sought the originals in books or in the teeming womb of his invention. The sprightly ladies and their antagonists in 'Love's Labour's Lost' may have been suggested to him by fragments of Elizabeth's Court, of which he may have caught casual glimpses through the friendship of Southampton, or other accidental means; or he may have beheld the originals of the saucy and intrepid fair ones upon a scene more on a level with his own, which, knowing that human nature is the same everywhere, making allowance for a few external differences, he may have elevated a little on the stilts of fashion and made to figure in a Court.

Where the sexes meet and engage in the war of raillery, the subject tossed to and fro between them and manipulated into all sorts of shapes is sure to be love, which, according to the temperaments and ethical idiosyncrasies of the combatants, will touch upon every interval lying between grossness and refinement. What the ladies and their lovers would like to say, did custom accord to language the freedom of thought, we discover clearly enough from what they actually do say; the ladies are all Calypsos, although the gentlemen scarcely belong to the Odyssean type.

Ask any female reader of Shakespeare whether he understood nature or not, and she will certainly answer in the affirmative. He therefore understood female nature, of which women are the best judges, and so we may assume his representations to be correct. His women say and do what living women do and say—that is, as far as it is permitted to make words correspond with thoughts, and actions with both. Charmian is the symbol of her sex when she inquires of the sooth-sayer whether she is to be married, and, if so, how many children she is to have, to which the reader of futurity replies: ‘If every one of thy wishes had a womb, a million!’ To dive into the depths of a woman’s thoughts might well have been one of the dozen labours of the son of Alcmena, and would have been the most difficult of the whole. The lights and shadows that glance over the surface, the dew of tears or the ripple of smiles, the frown of anger or the tone of endearment, are often only so many hieroglyphics which Tiresias himself would fail to interpret—that is, as to the particular direction in which their sense points, though their general significance be far from

unintelligible. Take the language of Beatrice, of Cressida, of Katharina or Bianca, or even of Desdemona, and infer from it the very core of the speaker's thoughts, and you will be nearer the mark than if you tried the same experiment on a living woman, because Shakespeare links the idea and the expression more closely than we usually find them in real life.

Women often say exactly the reverse of what they mean, and would therefore be understood by the rule of contraries. They expect their lovers to be adepts in the diviner's art, and prize them in proportion to their proficiency. Beatrice is not meant to be a sphinx in the expression of her predominant desires; she exhibits the colour of her wishes without reserve by the aid of a phraseology overlying ideas and emotions which women usually keep veiled. As I have said elsewhere, she is the female counterpart of Mercutio, in this only differing from him—that she lavishes her irony, her satire, and her wit on the man whom she secretly loves, and pushes her hostilities to such extremities that her lover at certain moments dreads her like the plague.

'She speaks poniards, and every word stabs. If her breath were as terrible as her terminations, there were no living near her; she would infect to the north star. I would not marry her, though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed.'

In 'Romeo and Juliet,' which may be termed *par excellence* the tragedy of love, whatever is loftiest and saddest in passion, most prolific of painful sympathy, and most suggestive of sorrow, is ushered in by a proem teeming with sensual ideas and images. Everybody you meet seems to have no thought for anything

but enjoyment. Serving-men, nurse, mother, father, culminating of course in the professed suitor, dwell incessantly on the idea which forms the kernel of an epithalamium. The youthful Capulet is put forward wreathed and garlanded like a lovely victim about to be offered on the altar of Aphrodite. Her nurse revels in all sorts of hymeneal anticipations, and her mother, with a warmth and freedom scarcely in harmony with her relationship, involves her rhetoric in a crowd of imagery which few mothers of her rank would have the hardihood to employ. A lady of twenty-eight, however, seeing her daughter about to become a wife, might naturally enough have all her emotions awakened and carried back fourteen or fifteen years, when she herself flaunted through the streets of Verona as a bride. Young mothers have been known to regard their marriageable daughters as rivals, and to be jealous of their standing on the same level with themselves; but Lady Capulet, though in the ripest age of womanhood and probably invested with that beauty which even in Italy would be allowed to characterise her age, betrays nothing of this feeling; on the contrary, she is content with being made happy by proxy, though a little too cynical in probing the sources of her daughter's happiness, so that if Juliet understood her, and was at all given to blushing, her face must have resembled that of the sun in the old tapestry.

Nowhere, however, has Shakespeare rendered more apparent the difference with which different minds invest what belongs to love. The gross and rude degrade it to their own level, the ordinary make it commonplace, the thoughtlessly gay taint it in their apprehension with vice, while they to whom it comes

as a revelation from the skies are impassioned, elevated, pure, and worthy to receive into their souls all that is sweetest in the fragrance and perfume of life.

It must be evident to observers of human nature that earnest and impassioned characters are often but indifferent companions, because unless in cynical moods, which with them are of rare occurrence, they eschew those pleasantries and light skirmishes of wit which make up so large a part of common conversation. The nearer people are to the ordinary level the more they are liked, since they do not annoy those with whom they converse by diving under their feet or soaring over their heads. The richest and most powerful minds may, of course, if they choose, put off their superiority, and deal in familiar dialectics, so as to charm even the rank and file of mankind. But this does not take place as a rule. It was only when he desired to be thought mad that Hamlet threw aside his retired, abstracted, and melancholy mood, to indulge in unchastened licence of speech with the two courtiers who were sent to reconnoitre his mental position. Other than astonished they could not be to find the prince, whose habitual gravity would have become his grandsire, dealing in coarse jests entirely out of keeping with everything they had observed in him before. No doubt they may say within themselves: 'If this be madness, yet there's method in't; though little short of a sudden craze in the brain can account for the change in him who has been hitherto regarded as the glass of fashion and the mould of form.' The same secret purpose explains, if it does not justify, the unlicensed tone of Hamlet's talk with Ophelia in the play-scene and in the corridor. To her, whom he had been accustomed to reverence as something sacred, he

uses language so unmeasured that she concludes him at once to be insane :

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown !

From the surprise of Ophelia we must infer the extreme tenderness and delicacy of Hamlet's previous manner ; but, as afterwards in her own case, what she regards as the jangling of the mind gives scope to the grosser elements of thought, and enables them to take precedence of taste and reason. So again in Lear, the ungoverned fancy riots in licentious pictures, linking together ideas and images unobjectionable apart and in themselves, but assuming a different character and colour when distorted by a mind diseased.

No explanation of this kind will ward off censure from some scenes in 'Pericles,' in 'Measure for Measure,' 'The Comedy of Errors,' 'All's Well that Ends Well,' and several other plays. Even in 'As You Like It' there are some things contrary to good taste, though scarcely anything perhaps which does not throw a light on the manners and tone of thinking prevalent in the poet's time. It would be beside my purpose to enter into a comparison of Shakespeare in the matter of licence with Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Webster, Massinger, Ford, and other old English dramatists ; but there is one Greek writer whom he too much resembles in genius to allow the characters of their minds to pass without remark.

Aristophanes was in many respects a Greek Shakespeare, as Shakespeare is an English Aristophanes. Without the aid of the Athenian dramatist, some traits in the national character of his countrymen and countrywomen would have remained unknown or unintelligible to us. The language in which the

disclosures are made may often be chargeable with effrontery as well as with wanton exaggeration, but contemplated from a philosophical point of view it is lifted out of the domain of taste into that of ethnology, and serves many scientific purposes. The same will doubtless be said of Shakespeare's language many thousands of years hence by students on the banks of the Oregon, the Red River, or the Paraná.

ESSAY VII

CONCEPTION OF THE FEMALE CHARACTER

It is no matter of surprise that Shakespeare, considering the character of the age in which he lived, should have formed a low estimate of women; but that Aristotle should have done the same, with so many superior advantages at his command, is scarcely intelligible. He says that, upon the whole, women are rather bad than good; but are not men also upon the whole rather bad than good? There has always, it seems, been a sort of warfare going on between the sexes, as well as between those who take one side or the other, and this state of hostility leads to the adoption of partial views; so that women and the advocates of women misrepresent those whom they choose to regard as their enemies, while men and their advocates do the same. This is not unnatural among wits, or sportive writers who feel no regard for truth. But Aristotle was not a wit, or one who wrote for effect. He studied human nature in order, if possible, to understand it thoroughly, especially in the sexual relations, and yet we find that of half the human race he arrived at the conclusion that evil elements predominate in its constitution. It is rare to find any writer, great or little, who does not on this subject agree with Aristotle; women themselves, when not engaged in controversy,

fall into the same vein of thinking, even while intent, as they suppose, on lauding their own sex.

A dispute which has been carried on ever since the creation of mankind can hardly be expected to be settled now.

There are certainly great differences between the sexes, mental as well as physical, and it seems doubtful whether they who attempt to remove the differences are not mischievously occupied. In Shakespeare these differences are brought out in the most marked manner. The contrast between the hunter and his game is not more striking than that presented in these dramas between the wooer and the wooed. Sometimes, as in the case of Beatrice, hostilities are commenced by the weaker party, who exhibits in the conduct of them too much of the rough energy and reckless intrepidity of the stronger; sometimes, as in the case of Lady Macbeth, the woman appears for a while the superior in intellectual force as well as in the fervour of passion; but the excitement which buoys her up is unnatural, and speedily leads to a collapse which terminates her being.

In real life women beheld in contrast with certain men are superior, not only in mental but sometimes in bodily power; but, as a rule, power is the appanage of the male, while grace and subtlety are those of the female. This leads to many of the moral phenomena we witness in the world, where women in order to defend themselves against brute force put in practice all the arts and cunning and deception in the hope of thereby escaping from oppression and barbarity. But in such cases neither sex is fulfilling the designs of nature, which means that they should co-operate, and oppose their united faculties to external circumstances, in which

case the woman's finer organs would form the complement to those of the man, which are more enduring as well as powerful. But when circumstances place man and woman in the relation of contending parties fear often strips woman of all her finer qualities, and clothes her with craft and falsehood. She ought never to be engaged in conflict with man, but when thrust, whether with or against her will, into such a conflict she has no choice but to lie and overreach.

Among savages women submit to perform all the drudgery of life, not voluntarily, but because they must, and in several stages of what we call civilisation they continue to perform much the same part. It is not of such women that effeminate poets like Byron can affirm, that while love is only part of man's life it is woman's whole existence; for in such a life there is little to do with love, and much with hate.

In all stages of society, however, women, being the weaker sex, are necessarily governed by men, a statement which may not be considered chivalrous or polite, though its truth be undeniable. All the great business of the world is carried on by men—its laws, its wars, its commerce, its trade, its industry—sometimes with, but generally without, the co-operation of women. Hitherto we have beheld no female senators, and, though barbarians have sometimes forced the women into the battlefield, their presence, I believe, has seldom been found serviceable; neither have ships-of-war, or even merchantships, been anywhere entrusted to the management of women. To the masculine brain we owe nearly all inventions and discoveries, the development of principles, the application of processes, the dynamics of manufactures, the direction of education, the discovery of philosophy, the framing

and regulation of civil society. We may then inquire with Anacreon, is there nothing left in this world's work for women? This is left for them: to be the sharers with man in whatever is good, and to be themselves the *spolia opima* of his most glorious victories; for even where they neither toil nor fight, women come in for the best share of whatever is toiled or fought for.

It did not fall much within the scope of Shakespeare's plan to consider women in any other light than as the object of man's passion, the chief incentive to his actions, good or evil, and the victim too frequently of her own or his vices. To develop his views of woman he put upon the stage numerous examples of female character, each belonging to a separate type and exhibiting the qualities which, according to his theory, belong to that type. The historian of ancient art had come after long study to the conclusion that the perfection of female beauty was not made the supreme object of art, because it was so easy of attainment. The reverse, I believe, was the case; and our dramatic poets have found the difficulty of representing female character to be as great as the ancient artists found it to represent the female countenance, for the beauty of form is less difficult.

It is in this part of his art that Shakespeare excels all other modern dramatic poets. He alone has put women of a high order and at the same time natural upon the stage. The shades, however, of difference between woman and woman when approximating at all to excellence are so fine and subtle, though in fact as real as those which distinguish man from man, that even he in the plenitude of his powers never sought to exhibit many female characters in one play; and in the entire body of his works, while the men may be reckoned by hundreds, the women are comparatively few.

To show the difficulty of exhibiting the differences by which one woman, good or bad, is distinguished from another, I may instance Rosalind and Celia, Regan and Goneril. The two cousins in the former case, though swayed by much the same sentiments, pursuing the same objects, and impelled by the same motives, are yet dissimilar in some respects, but the dissimilarity is so slight that it needs a microscopic eye to discern it. So again in the wolfish daughters of Lear, cold-blooded cruelty, thirst of power, sensuality, ingratitude, together with their other characteristics, are cast so exactly in the same mould that we are often constrained to depend upon the name in order to determine which of the two does or says this or that.

When we come to the women who represent types the case is different: Juliet and Imogen act under the sway of pure love, but in Juliet's character this love shows itself in one way, in that of Imogen in another, so that no speech of Juliet would suit Imogen, while no proceeding of Imogen would suit Juliet. Desdemona is in love, but her love is as different from that of Juliet as Othello is different from Romeo. In the supersubtle Venetian the elements of love are curiosity, vanity, admiration of adventure, giddy changeableness, sexual passion, strange and wayward fancy; while in the young Capulet love resolves itself into simple elements: admiration of manly beauty, appreciation of the lover's passion by which her own is kindled, ardent desire, leading to a preference pure as the heavens, and to be extinguished only by death. In Beatrice an honest heart and upright principles are disguised and distorted by wanton manners, and a language bordering upon the utmost verge of licence; yet whoever should take Beatrice for an unchaste

woman would misinterpret her entire nature. Virtue in her wears a rough disguise, but by putting on a mask loses not a particle of its nature. No character in dramatic poetry displays more completely the essential difference between chastity and modesty. Juliet herself is not more chaste, while even Mercutio is scarcely more immodest.

To her, Cressida forms the most complete contrast. This female character, which, as everybody knows, is a modern invention foisted upon antiquity, constitutes the beau-ideal of a courtesan, not in Shakespeare's mind only, but, as it were, in the very nature of things; she was born for the part, and the part seems to have been created for her. Nowhere, perhaps, is Shakespeare's creative power more daringly exercised than in the origination and development of this character, in which we find united the efflorescence and poetry of lewdness, the incapacity of self-government, the outbursts of sexual passion, the force of temperament, the ready and subtle sophistry, by which the individual seeks to escape from self-condemnation by expanding her own vices so as to make them encompass her whole sex; she sins with intrepidity, gives way at once to the gusts of desire, passes without hesitation or a blush from one lover's arms to another's, behaves with equal wantonness to each, and then calmly bases her self-defence on the conviction that all women do the same:

Ah, poor our sex! this fault in us I find,
The error of our eye directs our mind:
What error leads must err; O, then conclude
Minds sway'd by eyes are full of turpitude.

When she first appears in Troy, in a scene which for depth of insight and delicacy of touch knows few

equals, we are to suppose she is a maid; yet such is the ardour of her temperament that, with all the art of which she is mistress, she is scarcely able to conceal the impatience with which she listens to Troilus' love-speeches. Her behaviour says plainly, Act, but don't talk. 'Will you walk in, my lord?' An interruption which Troilus, thrown by his poetical imagination into the very heaven of rapture, does not notice. The bliss of the moment, her presence, her words, her rare beauty, the inward expectation of joy, overmaster his emotions, while her coarse nature yearns for immediate physical delight. Yet, though she betrays herself twice, her bearing upon the whole is that of a maid, modest yet longing, a sort of improvised Juliet, but without a particle of her devotion or tenderness. Whoever desires to dwell on one of Shakespeare's masterpieces will study the character of Cressida, more especially as it displays itself in this scene, which exhibits all the inspiration of lascivious passion labouring to put on the mask of love, and in fact putting it on so skilfully that to the high-souled and virtuous Troilus the completest incarnation of a courtesan on record appears to be the model of a bashful virgin.

Re-enter PANDARUS.

Pan. What, blushing still? have you not done talking yet?

Cres. Boldness comes to me now, and brings me heart.
Prince Troilus, I have loved you night and day
For many weary months.

Tro. Why was my Cressid then so hard to win?

Cres. Hard to seem won: but I was won, my lord,
With the first glance that ever—Pardon me—
If I confess much, you will play the tyrant.
I love you now; but not, till now, so much

But I might master it : in faith, I lie ;
 My thoughts were like unbridled children, grown
 Too headstrong for their mother. See, we fools !
 Why have I blabb'd ? who shall be true to us,
 When we are so unsecret to ourselves ?
 But, though I loved you well, I woo'd you not ;
 And yst, good faith, I wish'd myself a man,
 Or that we women had men's privilege
 Of speaking first. Sweet, bid me hold my tongue,
 For in this rapture I shall surely speak
 The thing I shall repent. See, see, your silence,
 Cunning in dumbness, from my weakness draws
 My very soul of counsel ! stop my mouth.

Tro. And shall, albeit sweet music issues thence.

Cres. My lord, I do beseech you, pardon me ;
 'Twas not my purpose, thus to beg a kiss :
 I am ashamed. O heavens ! what have I done ?
 For this time will I take my leave, my lord.

Tro. Your leave, sweet Cressid !

Cres. Pray you, content you.

Tro. What offends you, lady ?

Cres. Sir, mine own company.

Tro. You cannot shun
 Yourself.

Cres. Let me go and try :
 I have a kind of self resides with you ;
 But an unkind self, that itself will leave,
 To be another's fool. I would be gone :
 Where is my wit ? I know not what I speak.

Tro. Well know they what they speak that speak so wisely.

Cres. Perchance, my lord, I show more craft than love ;
 And fell so roundly to a large confession
 To angle for your thoughts : but you are wise,
 Or else you love not, for to be wise and love
 Exceeds man's might ; that dwells with gods above.

Tro. O that I thought it could be in a woman—
 As, if it can, I will presume in you—
 To feed for aye her lamp and flames of love ;
 To keep her constancy in plight and youth,
 Outliving beauty's outward, with a mind
 That doth renew swifter than blood decays !

Or that persuasion could but thus convince me,
 That my integrity and truth to you
 Might be affronted with the match and weight
 Of such a winnow'd purity in love ;
 How were I then uplifted ! but, alas !
 I am as true as truth's simplicity
 And simpler than the infancy of truth.

Cres. In that I'll war with you.

Tro. O virtuous fight,
 When right with right wars who shall be most right !
 True swains in love shall in the world to come
 Approve their truths by Troilus : when their rhymes,
 Full of protest, of oath and big compare,
 Want similes, truth tired with iteration,
 As true as steel, as plantage to the moon,
 As sun to day, as turtle to her mate,
 As iron to adamant, as earth to the centre,
 Yet, after all comparisons of truth,
 As truth's authentic author to be cited,
 ' As true as Troilus ' shall crown up the verse,
 And sanctify the numbers.

Cres. Prophet may you be !
 If I be false, or swerve a hair from truth,
 When time is old and hath forgot itself,
 When waterdrops have worn the stones of Troy,
 And blind oblivion swallow'd cities up,
 And mighty states characterless are grated
 To dusty nothing, yet let memory,
 From false to false, among false maids in love,
 Upbraid my falsehood ! when they've said ' as false,
 As air, as water, wind, or sandy earth,
 As fox to lamb, as wolf to heifer's calf,
 Pard to the hind, or stepdame to her son,'
 ' Yea,' let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood,
 ' As false as Cressid.'

When from Cressida we come to Cleopatra, another member of the frail sisterhood, though passing from a priest's daughter to a queen, we become sensible of a great descent. Cressida is a sovereign of her art,

which in her, after all, is less art than nature, so that her embodied frailty is so truly herself that she seems incapable of being anything but what she is.

Hallam is right where he says that, instead of painting in Cleopatra a lascivious queen, Shakespeare draws in coarse lines a common courtesan. She has none of the graces of Cressida, though in point of fascination she may exceed even her; but fascination assumes many forms, according as it addresses itself to higher or lower natures. Diomed, though no longer the Homeric Tydides, could not have accorded even a passing devotion to a woman who discussed the theory of physical pleasure with an eunuch; still less could Prince Troilus, the very pattern of impassioned and chivalrous devotion, though coarse and sensual individuals like Cæsar and Antony might derive gratification from her charms. Cæsar, indeed, toyed with her in passing as with a courtesan, but Antony, though he too knew her to be nothing more, was yet so thoroughly subdued by her voluptuous allurements that he lost all self-command in her presence. While the marriage with Octavia is in progress, Mecænas observes to Enobarbus :

Now Antony must leave her utterly.

Eno.

Never; he will not :

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale

Her infinite variety : other women cloy

The appetites they feed : but she makes hungry

Where most she satisfies : for vilest things

Become themselves in her ; that the holy priests

Bless her when she is riggish.

Juliet's character may perhaps justify a great divergence of opinion respecting her modesty or immodesty ; but while considering this point we are necessarily

thrown back upon the fundamental laws of human nature. Coleridge, with his Gothic fancy, excludes lust from the elements of which love is compounded, and must therefore, to be consistent, have regarded Juliet as a young constitutional courtesan, supplied by Shakespeare with language suited to her character. Love he believed to be something like oxygen, a simple element not resolvable into anything else. But to state this notion is to confute it. Love is the most complex of human passions as well as the most Proteus-like, since everything in our nature goes to the making of it up, while it has varied in constitution with every character in which it has existed since the creation. In no human being, however, could it exist without sexual passion, which, being an essential element of human nature, belongs obviously as much to women as to men, though infinitely varied and modified by the influence of other ingredients in the amalgam.

In judging of Juliet the character of the critic must be taken into account; the impassioned and poetical will see nothing wrong in her desires, or in the expression of them, while the cold and phlegmatic will be offended by the vehemence of her passion. Girl as she is, she understands with what view she has become a wife, and, simply because she is more a girl than a woman, she yearns for the unknown happiness to which her new position entitles her.

The conception of this character is so extraordinary, uniting the fiery passions of womanhood with the innocence and simplicity of girlhood, that it has never perhaps been properly represented on the stage, because young actresses cannot attain to the intellectual elevation and rich exuberance of thought

which Juliet throws into the paroxysms of her love, while older actresses find it all but impossible to realise the dewy freshness in which her fervent desires are cradled. The most enviable portion of Shakespeare's life must surely have been that in which he produced this beautiful creation, the equal of which is not to be found in modern poetry.

When a man has done his best it would be wise in him not to seek to better it, or even to produce parallel characters; yet Shakespeare had evidently Juliet in his mind's eye, and sought to rival her, when he produced Imogen, Portia, Helena, Desdemona, Ophelia; but they all range far below her level, and suggest the idea that in the conception of love and beauty Shakespeare's imagination was prolific but once.

While indulging in his profligate jests against women, suggesting that they are all frail and only waiting for an opportunity to prove it, he must lose sight of his own elaborate representations of female excellence; he means Isabella in 'Measure for Measure' to be a perfect woman, whose affections, powerful in themselves, are held in subjection to stern principles. She is, as far as a human being may be, without passion, and therefore, in theory, detaches herself from the world and intends to devote her life to the chill penances and useless devotions of a cloister—a design which provokes no regret in spectator or reader. But she is a real type of a certain class of women, who, proud of their own coldness, or rather of their power to keep in check the promptings of desire, imagine their conduct meritorious in refusing to fulfil the design of nature; yet perhaps, like Bellerophon, they devour their own hearts, and struggle vainly to extirpate those longings which torture them while

kneeling on the cold marble at the foot of the crucifix. Through her brother's illicit amour with Juliet, Isabella's mind is familiarised with all the phases of earthly passion, and is driven to invent pleas for incontinence and apologies for a transgression which has no allurements for her. This brings out all the beauty of her character; averse from sin herself, she is tolerant of it in others, or rather, making allowance for their weaknesses, she seeks to interpose the ægis of mercy between them and punishment. She thus becomes an apostle of humanity, a teacher of gentle forbearance, a sweet interpreter of the lapses and frailties of mankind. By pursuing this course Isabella makes a deep impression on the imagination, but is so far from entering within the sphere of our sympathies that we experience some disappointment at the conclusion to behold her in prospect of that domestic happiness which her taste or temperament had originally led her to despise.

Portia, in 'The Merchant of Venice,' plays a part as far removed from nature as her father's will is from common sense. She has passions and desires like other women, and is not chary in the expression of them; but as Lady Macbeth in her own imagination is unsexed by the 'spirits that tend on mortal thoughts,' so Portia is unsexed by the dry and dusty spirit of law. The idea of employing her as a great and experienced juris-consult to baffle the Jew and astonish the courts of Venice is a pretty fancy, productive of amusement on the stage, but lying as far out of the regions of probability as would have been her transformation into a salamander. In other respects she is unobjectionable enough, though, but for a few displays of reckless generosity, she may be

regarded as chiefly remarkable for her sweet disposition, her beauty, and her golden hair. Her language of course, like that of nearly all Shakespeare's women, is wanton and immodest, though it reflects no corresponding deflection from the right line in her conduct. Like Beatrice, she may affirm with the Roman poet—though in his case the truth of the affirmation is doubtful—‘My language is indeed reprehensible, but my life is pure.’

The young female apostate Jessica is generally regarded with more leniency than she deserves. In temperament wanton as a weasel, she makes her approaches to Christianity through lewdness, theft, and filial ingratitude, which, because her father is a miser and a Jew, audiences and readers often fail to condemn; indeed Shakespeare himself, though apparently desirous of softening the vulgar prejudice against the Hebrew people, in reality strengthens and stimulates this very prejudice by his delineation of Shylock and the cruelty of his enforced apostasy from his religion.

Ophelia, though in a great measure undeveloped, comes to us in a cloud, so to speak, of touching and gentle images, innocent as childhood and sweet as the breath of spring. Antigone is not more pure, nor is her fate more lamentable. Had Hamlet behaved less cruelly to Ophelia, her memory might have been less firmly ingrafted in the sympathies of all students of Shakespeare; as it is, her name is like a flower surcharged with dew, redolent of disappointment and sorrow, loving timidly as a child, admitting but one image into her heart, which, as that faded and passed away, broke and passed away with it. The gigantic elevation to which Hamlet is thrown up in the play,

his griefs, his melancholy, impart to him a sort of ubiquity which so thoroughly fills the mind that it scarcely leaves room for anything else; otherwise the character of Ophelia would shed its perfume over a much larger tract of our imagination than in existing circumstances it does. To form a conception of her loveliness we must glide from page to page, where she is introduced, until we come to the words :

Lay her i' the earth ;
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring !

When the mind of this darling object of Shakespeare's fancy has been unhinged by Hamlet's cruelty and the accident of her father's death, it lets fall a bunch of harmless indecencies, as the hand of a fainting girl drops flowers from its grasp. Where she had culled them she did not herself know. They had probably found their way into her memory in the nursery, from the lips of some thoughtless Danish girl murmuring them in an undertone to herself without precisely apprehending their import or giving herself any trouble about it.¹

Gervinus persuades himself that her imagination had been 'infected with sensual images' by Hamlet's conversation, and other German critics to whom Gervinus alludes are of opinion that Hamlet had

¹ When I was in Hayti, a gentleman told me that he had heard his nieces—who had received their first education in Paris, but had been sent to a superior school at Port-au-Prince, kept by the French Sisters, to complete their studies—singing the most libidinous songs in Creole; as they knew but little of that language, they did not understand the meaning of the verses. On inquiry he found that they had learned those songs from the Haytian servants, who are in the habit of singing them while at work.

seduced her. The play supplies us with no ground for either of these notions. Hamlet's language when he is affecting madness is obviously so unlike what it had been in his better days that Ophelia infers from that fact alone the subversion of his intellect.

The women who make their appearance in the historical plays—Constance, Queen Elinor, Margaret, Lady Anne, Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn—are less creations of art than misrepresentations of history, but nevertheless deserve a certain amount of attention from the student of Shakespeare. The ladies who figure in the Roman plays are upon the whole slight sketches, with the exception of Volumnia, the mother of Coriolanus, who, though performing a slight part in the action, holds a prominent place among the poet's female characters. What little is said of Portia, the wife of Brutus, is striking, but scarcely does justice to the memory of that noble lady, of whom nothing higher can be said than that she was worthy to be the wife of Marcus Brutus.

After this protracted survey can we flatter ourselves that we have ascertained Shakespeare's real opinion of women? I fear not. The seeds of this opinion are scattered far and wide over the whole surface of his dramas, here peeping forth in hints and sarcasms, there making their appearance in studied and lengthy declamations. Was Shakespeare the victim of domestic incontinence, or by the torture of suspicion was he the man who

Dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves?

While engaged in drawing a female portrait he may—nay, must—have felt that his expressions would be keenly scanned, and, success being a bread-and-

cheese question, he endeavoured to give as little offence as possible.

His philosophy of the female character is not, therefore, to be sought for in his elaborate pictures, but in incidental expressions, hints, aphorisms, brief reflections, shot like chance arrows into the business of the plays. But in drawing inferences from these, care must be taken to weigh the characters of those in whose mouths they are found. A jilted lover, a husband who imagines his wife to be an adulteress, a man maddened, like Lear, by the vices of particular women, a worn-out libertine like Jaques, a professed satirist on mankind in general, may be fairly expected to rail at the gentler sex.

The testimony of all these must therefore be set aside; only that of those who speak more in sorrow than in anger, or of women revealing unconsciously their own vices, can be regarded as of much account. It would be puerile to derive offence from passages in which the poet dwells upon the desires natural to the whole species, and therefore to women. For example, where Julia represents herself and her lover by two bits of paper with their names written on them, and in her fond imagination supposes them to be embracing, no idea of wrong on her part is suggested. In the verses already cited from Cressida's speech there is an admission unfavourable to her sex, but then it is made by a courtesan, consequently without value.

Shakespeare makes the Duke in 'Twelfth Night' praise and dispraise women. He first affirms:

Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,
Than women's are.

Upon further reflection, however, he changes his tone and maintains :

They lack retention.

Alas, their love may be call'd appetite,
No motion of the liver, but the palate,
That suffer surfeit, cloyment and revolt.

ESSAY VIII

CONCEPTION OF THE MALE CHARACTER

IN drawing the characters of men, Shakespeare proves himself to have been of the opinion that men as well as women were rather bad than good, since a majority of his male personages are either bad or foolish, and in individuals of this second class the tendencies are usually towards mischief. Among his men, the first for virtue and innocence of life is Romeo, who, though passionate and rash, has no gall in his composition, but, on the contrary, displays an extraordinary degree of forbearance, gentleness, beneficence, high honour, and placability of temper. Hamlet, more remarkable in many respects than Romeo, is less lovable, less gentle, though as distinguished for weakness of character as Romeo is for strength. With the latter to resolve is to act, while the former is always resolving and never acting, till betrayed into it by accidental impulse. Romeo, it may be said, is the slave of one passion, and views everything through the discoloured atmosphere thrown around it by that passion; while Hamlet, substituting in his preference thought for passion, deludes himself into the belief that to be calm and meditative is better than to be swayed by feeling and inclination. But passion is strength, the element which predominates in the idiosyncrasy of Romeo, overborne, however, by other

elements in that of Hamlet. Richard the Third—a favourite with actors, as well as with a large portion of the public—is scarcely a man at all; not that his wickedness exceeds what may be found in man, but that the motives which urge to its commission are inadequate, while the fiendish glee that invests each successive act of villainy is scarcely compatible with any modification of humanity. Assuming the possibility of the existence of such a character, it is still objectionable because inconsistent with probability.

Macbeth also is a villain, and one moreover who is deeply dyed in guilt, so deeply indeed as to know few parallels except among tyrants; yet in this class history supplies parallels—that is men who, to gratify ambition, would trample at once upon the ties of kindred and the most sacred laws of nature. Yet Macbeth is not a monster like Richard, not because his actions are in themselves better, but because in his career of guilt he exhibits occasional flashes of human feeling, of reverence for goodness, of aversion from the very crime he commits, which extort from us a certain amount of pity and sympathy, while, except by the mere display of courage at Bosworth, Richard never once touches the heart.

Edmund, in 'Lear,' is a remorseless caitiff whose wickedness puts on shapes so entirely out of the course of nature that, though his career sets out from an intelligible starting-point, he outrages so thoroughly as he proceeds our theory of humanity that we refuse him a place in it, and set him down as an impossible miscreant. I have frequently remarked in other places on the character of Iago, who, but for some few inadvertencies of the poet, would be one of the most masterly of his creations. Shakespeare is constantly

praised for his knowledge of human nature, and of that knowledge he doubtless possessed a large share; but we here and there find him straying beyond its limits, and attributing to his characters thoughts, sentiments, and actions which it is impossible they should have possessed or performed.

It is impossible to have studied the nature of the human mind without discovering that, whatever scheme of conduct a man traces out for himself, and is urged into by what he deems adequate motives, he invariably considers it lawful. Otherwise, however bad he might be, he would abhor himself and thus paralyse his own energy. Hamlet describes man as a creature of large discourse, looking before and after; but when an individual is bent on crime, he looks only in one direction—that is, forward. This is what Iago does, and while so doing it is impossible that he should condemn his own actions. We have good authority, in addition to our experience, for affirming that the heart of man is desperately wicked; that it may be, but we must not conceal from ourselves the fact that it is at the same time deceitful above all things, and this deceitfulness chiefly displays itself by throwing a delusive gloss over any villainy which a man may be engaged in accomplishing. Shakespeare has supplied excellent phrases for his own errors as well as other people's: for example, we may say in his very words that in describing the conduct of Iago he forgets to make the end agree with the beginning. The honest Ancient, as he is termed, has clearly satisfied himself that the injuries he has received, or believes himself to have received, justify the revenge he means to take for them: he has been set aside and despised, he has been employed by Othello in

running to and fro, almost as a menial, while Michael Cassio, who never set a division in battle array, is put over his head. Nay, far worse than all this, his bed has been dishonoured by those to whom malignant fortune compels him to truckle. This maddens him, and, while it whets the edge of his vindictiveness, imparts the colour of justice to the course which the weakness of his social position alone constrains him to pursue.

Cassio, a handsome simpleton, 'a fellow almost damned in a fair life,'¹ whatever the amount of his good qualities may be, exhibits no indication of possessing a corresponding intelligence. He fawns like a spaniel on his General's wife, and is apparently quite ready to take advantage of her weakness, while he lives with a poor fond courtesan in whom he has encouraged the belief that he will marry her. A greater contrast could hardly be presented to the Ancient or to the General. What manner of man Shakespeare meant Othello to be—in character, manners, condition, and race—is tolerably clear from the whole tenor of the play; and the flaws apparent in his conception of the character are scarcely less obvious. He certainly intends us to understand that he is a negro² with a

¹ The author here follows Mr. Tyrwhitt's suggested reading.

² Schlegel says that the Moor has been made in every respect a negro—by mistake indeed, but he thinks the mistake fortunate. Few, however, in England at least, will be found to agree with him. We need not go to the negroes for passion, which exists in greater strength among the Moors. Lloyd thinks Othello a negro, and discovers all sorts of reasons for his opinion. Coleridge, however, is persuaded that Shakespeare did not mean Othello to be a negro, though he allows he meant him to be black, because he was a Moor. We cannot wonder that Shakespeare was ignorant of the complexion of a Moor when we find a man almost our contemporary imagining him to be black. Shakespeare talked of thick lips and sooty skin simply because he knew no better. He fancied all the time he was describing a Moor, and had no intention whatever of making Othello a negro.

black skin, thick lips, and that hasty and ferocious temper which distinguishes the indigenous Africans from the rest of mankind. He calls him, indeed, the Moor, but erroneously ; a Moor he cannot be, for the Moors are Arabs who have lips as symmetrical and beautiful as Shakespeare's own. Iago calls him a Barbary horse ; and he is invariably spoken of, not as a slave from the interior, but as belonging to that race which inhabits the north of the Atlas, and in one instance as a person of royal blood. Iago himself, whose name is Spanish, is sometimes a Venetian and sometimes a Florentine—but these things are scarcely worth notice. He says nothing of his costume, and needs to say nothing, for, being an officer in the Venetian army, he must be clad as a Venetian, though some modern actors have fancied they were displaying their knowledge and judgment by representing him in the garments of an Oriental. Shakespeare contrasts with singular skill the character of Iago with that of Othello. The latter is brave, confiding, intemperate, credulous, licentious withal if we may believe his Ancient, but possessing an understanding so limited that he suffers himself to be played upon like a creature without perception or volition by one whom he nevertheless wrongs and insults. Position and superior military qualities impart to him a certain dignity which enables him to look down upon Iago, whose superior intellect is marred by union with meanness, baseness, hypocrisy, craft, and treachery. What Shakespeare means by the vale of years is not clear. Othello is not amorous. His love is rather a delusion than a passion ; he is jealous because, reasoning on his own physical and moral qualities, he comes to the conclusion that in reality

Desdemona cannot love him. Discerning his temper and limited understanding, Iago is encouraged to make of him egregiously an ass, though, while chuckling over this achievement, the Ancient fails to perceive that instead of one ass he is making two. The other characters in this play—Brabantio, Roderigo, and Montano—are commonplace persons, demanding no observation save that the second serves no other purpose in the drama than to illustrate the rascality of Iago.

While treating of the plot of 'Much Ado about Nothing,' I could not avoid making some observations on the characters, male and female. With the exception of Benedick, however, those of the men are slight and trivial; the Prince and Claudio, who, like two coach horses, are always found running abreast, scarcely differ at all from each other except in name; their views of life are, for aught that appears, identical, so are their likings and dislikings, their hasty judgments, poor revenges, insolence towards age, credulity, weakness, and foppish affectation of courage. Such individuals might figure well enough in a comedy, but, though it is so called and by many so considered, 'Much Ado about Nothing' is not a comedy, and very narrowly escapes being a tragedy with comic scenes in it, as in 'Romeo and Juliet.'

Don John, by whose shallow artifice the Prince and Claudio are deceived, is a poor helpless villain who in carrying out his designs places his entire dependence on Borachio, a blabbing rogue through whose folly his lame policy is counteracted. To be over-reached by two caitiffs so wanting in craft implies little understanding in the lover or his friend. Even as a lover Claudio makes but a poor show, for though he lays

claim in the church scene to the credit of a poetical attachment, we are not inclined by his previous conduct to accord it to him. Shakespeare had not made up his mind at the outset whether Claudio should make love to Hero for her beauty or for her fortune; to have represented such a piece of unbaked dough loving at first sight would, he felt, be unnatural, so he puts into his mouth the intimation that he had seen and liked Hero before he went to the wars; and this statement would have done very well but for an unlucky question which he puts to Don Pedro implying complete ignorance of Hero's family. Had he, before leaving Messina, known enough of the lady to conceive a liking for her, he must also have known Leonato her father, in which case he would surely have discovered whether he had a son or not; yet we find him, like a calculating fortune-hunter, making himself sure on this point before he proclaims what he means to be taken for love.

When Petruchio avows his intention of wooing Katharina's father's money-bags, we understand and estimate the fellow at once; but in the case of Claudio it appears to be expected of us that we should, in spite of his fortune-hunting, regard him as a noble gentleman perched on the very pinnacle of honour. To judge of any incident in a drama we must imagine it to be taking place in real life, and, tried by this test, Claudio's conduct towards Hero is paltry and offensive. His language to her when he supposes her to be false is so brutal that no change of circumstances ought afterwards to have induced her to become his wife. The stain he had cast upon her good name in calculation and cold blood ought to, and would in a delicate-minded woman, have raised up an eternal bar between

her and him, and the effect of the contrary behaviour in Hero freezes the little interest we before took in her, and would kill the play were it not for the presence of her cousin Beatrice.

Benedick is upon the whole a fine character ; his determination to chastise Claudio, which we believe to be formed in downright earnest, raises him above what is meant to be the principal character, and the imagination follows him into a happier future with his termagant wife than the most credulous hope can assign to such luckless nuptials as those of Claudio and Hero.

Another cluster of characters is that which we find in 'As You Like It,' but, excepting Jaques and Orlando, they are little developed ; the mind dwells upon them rather as a group than as so many separate individuals. Orlando himself is an amorous youth, good-looking and powerful as a wrestler, but as silly as one of Rosalind's sheep ; and it is this silliness that protects him from disgust. If he were in fact less of a fool, his kissing and toying with a supposed youth and all the other evidences of mock love would excite loathing. Jaques is the philosopher of the piece, and illustrated the common belief expressed by Byron that the tree of knowledge is not that of life. The Duke, indeed, insinuates that he is a worn-out libertine, and that his disrelish of pleasure is less the effect of a philosophical disdain than of surfeit. As the philosophy of courtiers generally springs from some such source, we should think no better of Jaques himself were it not for his humanity, a quality which Shakespeare bestows on all those personages whom he wishes us to love.

There is one character in Shakespeare in which

I can discover neither flaw nor stain. I mean that of Horatio, who, though he says little and does less, suggests the persuasion notwithstanding that there are few acts of greatness or of goodness that he could not have performed. Though occupying an inferior position, he contrasts favourably with Hamlet, than whom he is more disinterested, more regardless of danger, more ready to make sacrifices of fame or even of life, and his attachment, more than any other circumstance, tends to raise Hamlet in our esteem, since to be loved by such a man implies the possession of qualities of the highest order.

There are few passages in poetry more touching, better calculated to beget love or deep affection, than that in which Hamlet addresses Horatio before the play—the speaker and the man spoken to appear in the loftiest and the most enviable light in which men can stand, and recall to our remembrance the Pylades and Orestes of Greek tragedy spoken of as having but one soul in two bodies. And such are Hamlet and Horatio, to have given being to whom is next in felicity of creation to that of having produced Romeo and Juliet. Pylades is a secondary character, but invested with qualities so rare and lovable that even when he plays the part of a mute personage they pierce through his very silence and endear him to your feelings. Horatio is encircled by a scarcely less beautiful halo in Shakespeare. More heroic than the hero, sweet, modest, retiring, brave as bravery itself, and faithful unto death, he may be regarded as the noblest man save Romeo that Shakespeare has placed before us. In forming our opinion of Hamlet himself we look upon the friendship of Horatio as his best title to our esteem. Shakespeare suggests the idea that

these two Danish friends have, like Helena and Hermia, grown up, played, and studied together in an intimacy stricter than that of brothers. Just before the exhibition which is to decide his conduct and his fate, Hamlet says to this modern Pylades :

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal'd thee for herself ; for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks : and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she pleases. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.

But, who or what is Horatio—is he a foreigner or a Dane? Shakespeare does not himself know what to think : he makes him occasionally one thing, occasionally another, though in the end he is admitted to be native and to the manner born. Yet it is not a little strange that this extraordinary character should be beheld through an atmosphere of indecision. Bent upon the production of certain effects which he regards as paramount, Shakespeare is doubtful whether he shall make Horatio a Dane or a foreigner, and in this uncertainty represents Hamlet regarding him now in one light, now in another. This, so far as it goes, is a defect in the play, since it suggests the idea of a work of art not thoroughly moulded into shape, and which has not received those final touches that impart the appearance of consistency to a piece by giving it a close resemblance to nature. In real life Hamlet would have no hesitation in recognising Horatio on

first seeing him, nor, considering that he had been at Elsinore for two months and had been present at his father's funeral, if not at his mother's wedding, could they have possibly met for the first time in the ghost scene. Before Hamlet appears at all upon the stage Horatio undeniably proves himself to have been a Dane, and one, moreover, who had accompanied the dead king upon two expeditions, was familiar with the armour that he wore, and stood so near his person when 'he smote the sledded Polacks on the ice' that he marked the frown upon his countenance. Afterwards Horatio forgets all this, and says, while talking with Hamlet,

I saw him once, he was a goodly king.

But the confusion of Shakespeare's ideas on this point is most apparent in that conversation with Horatio in which Hamlet unmistakably addresses him as a foreigner just arrived at Elsinore. Why, in fact, does Horatio ask Hamlet, when a cannon is fired off to notify that the King is drinking, 'Is this a custom, my lord?' to which the prince replies: 'Ay, marry is 't, but to my mind . . . it is a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance.' But why should Horatio ask the question at all? The King has been on the throne for two months, during which time he has been as well able to notice what was going on as Hamlet himself. Here, then, Horatio suggests the idea, either that he is a foreigner, or that he has been so long absent from the country as to have forgotten the ways of the people. But this argument is refuted by what he says to Marcellus and Bernardo, which shows him to be intimately acquainted, not only with outward circumstances, but with the most hidden

secrets of state. Hamlet, however, is determined for the nonce to treat him as a foreigner just arrived in Denmark, and speedily to leave it again in order to resume his studies at Wittenberg, a design which is immediately lost sight of and never referred to again throughout the play. That Horatio is contemplated by the prince as a stranger at this juncture is clear: 'We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart,' a speech which could not be addressed to a native Dane. Having served its purpose—namely, to describe the drunken habits of the people—the fancy is dismissed, and Horatio is thenceforward viewed in his proper light as an indigenous Dane, to whom from earliest youth Hamlet has been a devoted friend, of which we are assured by himself where he says 'Ever since my soul could distinguish between man and man I have selected thee,' etc. Wherever Horatio appears throughout the drama, he shows like some bright particular star, and throws a blaze of light and glory over the scene. At the close, when he is about to drink the poison that he may accompany his friend in death, he exclaims 'I am more an antique Roman than a Dane,' and only consents to live at Hamlet's earnest entreaty that he may protect his name from obloquy. Had the piece terminated by his elevation to the throne, it would surely have been a better ending than that which places young Fortinbras in that position.

I have said that Horatio contrasts favourably with Hamlet, yet this is the character through which Shakespeare has chosen to express his most subtle, refined, and elevated thoughts. No individual represented on the modern stage pervades it so completely with his presence as Hamlet does, so that he suggests

the idea of ubiquity ; yet, grand and eloquent as he is, he exhibits unintellectual vices, coarseness, selfishness, cruelty, with some degree of self-conceit, and, if it be not an oversight on the part of the poet, gross and solemn falsehood. For this reason Hamlet inspires less love than admiration ; that Ophelia should have loved him as she did excites our surprise, and to account for it we are constrained to go backward and assume that, before his mother's fatal marriage with his father's murderer, he had shown himself in a different light.

As he exhibits himself in the play, he is cranky, crotchety, sometimes pert and saucy to his friends, sometimes moping or dull or gloomy, sometimes treacherous, sometimes gratuitously indecent. As in a fine April day, however, though dusky clouds and rain-showers sweep over the sky, sunshine predominates, and gives its character to the day ; so in Hamlet virtuous qualities predominate, and throw their contraries into the shade. The power lodged in this character by Shakespeare is proved by its effects upon our literature, which is full of his sayings and of references to them.

In mere ethical development, Hamlet is as inferior as a man as Juliet is superior as a woman, though she also, in order to be true to nature, has her defects : that is, a strange combination of timidity and courage, of equivocation and frankness, of maiden modesty and overwhelming desire. Hamlet, when it suits him, lies like a Trojan, rails, boasts, swaggers in King Cambyse's vein, but his fury collapses abruptly, and leaves him stranded on the shore of irresolution. By his expressed preferences we discover the radical imperfection of his character : the man dearest to his heart is he who is

not passion's slave, that is, one in whom moody meditation excludes the fierce thirst of enjoyment.

It demanded a woman of sweet, gentle, unimpassioned nature like Ophelia to love him at all: Juliet would have scorned him, Lady Macbeth would have put her foot on his breast, Desdemona would have laughed and turned away in search of someone more adventurous. His mother, as far as passion is concerned, discloses the secret: he was fat and scant of breath, the very antipodes of passion. Shakespeare knew that love and fat seldom go together; for which reason, pushing things to an extreme, he exhibits Falstaff making love for money.

It is true that, in an outburst of irritation and natural excitement, Hamlet affirms that he loved Ophelia more than forty thousand brothers; but his words prove nothing in opposition to a long series of unloving acts. In life it would have been impossible for one who loved to behold the woman whom he did love perishing and fading away through his neglect and perfidy. We must eliminate, therefore, from our theory of Hamlet's character the notion that he was ever a lover, and accept his declaration that he loved her not, though at the moment he believed that he did, and perhaps felt all that one so constituted could feel.

I have remarked elsewhere that it was his constitutional timidity that withheld him from asserting his right to the crown to which his father's brother could have made no claim, especially as the people loved Hamlet, and had he shown himself worthy could have placed him by force on the throne in the natural course of succession. It is to his want of courage, therefore, that we owe the play. Taking

advantage of this vice of character, his uncle not only perpetrates murder, pollutes his mother, and plots his perpetual exclusion from the throne, but meditates sending him to England, then tributary to Denmark, and to have him there cut off.

When actually embarked on this fatal voyage, Hamlet picks the pockets of the ambassadors, forges a commission ordering them to be put to death, returns it to their pockets, and is then opportunely taken by pirates, who, in the hope of a reward, set him on shore in Denmark. Regard this act how we may, it lowers the character of Hamlet, proves him to be a bloody-minded trickster, and consequently diminishes the interest we thenceforward feel in his fate. Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern were the King's involuntary agents and could hardly deserve such a cruel end. Hamlet is therefore capable of putting two men to death without much scrutiny into their deserving it, though he shrinks from the bloody duty of killing the arch-criminal. Destitute of deliberate courage, he lies in wait for accidental impulses, influenced by one of which he kills Polonius behind the arras, in the hope that it might be the King, whom he had just before passed by and timidly spared.

When we come to the fencing scene with Laertes, a more ranting fire-eater than Tybalt, Hamlet exhibits a trait of disingenuity which almost extinguishes the nobility of his character. According to the whole course of his conduct from first to last, it is evident that he is not intended to be a madman, but is merely acting insanity for a purpose ; yet, to calm the resentment of Laertes and stand well in his estimation, he affirms that he has been mad and that it was his mad-

ness, not he, that had slain Polonius and driven Ophelia to despair. All these considerations make of Hamlet's character an enigma, but lower it at the same time, while they prove that the poet had exhausted his genius, which collapsed under the weight of his own design.

ESSAY IX

LOVE

WITHOUT forming and fixing in our minds, at whatever expense of thought, a true conception of Shakespeare's theory of love, we shall fail to comprehend many parts of his writings. Yet he had himself, perhaps, no very definite idea of his own views, which sprang at first from his physical idiosyncrasies, and were afterwards corrected and modified by reflection. A man's ideas about love depend greatly on his estimate of women, which with Shakespeare in the early part of his life was a very low one. Nothing can be more derogatory to the sex than the sentiments which pervade 'Venus and Adonis,' the Sonnets, and most of his shorter pieces. The whole poem of 'Lucrece' is only an expansion of Ovid's idea that Lucretia consented to her own undoing and yet killed herself afterwards; though, whether this was his opinion or not, the poem is so frigid, so quibbling, so remote from nature, so tedious, that scarcely anything of value is to be extracted from it. Venus is a personification of female passion, who, having to deal with a statue rather than a man, exhausts all the arts of wantonness to animate this beautiful form of clay. The boy, indeed, as Shakespeare calls him, makes a good figure as a preacher, and lectures the

goddess with an eloquence as little suited to his age as to the situation in which he finds himself.

As time came to the aid of Shakespeare's genius, he retreated from some of the false positions he had taken up at the outset, his theory expanded, rose higher, invested itself with greater delicacy, became subtle, refined, purified, so that woman, instead of being a rampant wanton, came forth in Juliet as passion incarnate, full of all the turbulent elements of love, but co-ordinated into one beautiful whole, instinct with all the fire of its original elements, but elevated by rapturous preference into the highest form which love can assume. Some philosophers have argued that love is a passion not made up of several ingredients but simple and *sui generis* in its nature ; but this hypothesis soon proves on examination to be untenable, since there is nothing so composite as love as it exists in intellects of a high order, though as we descend from that elevation to the lowest type of humanity we find it putting off some quality at every step in the descent, till we arrive at last at simple animal instinct. Poetical reasoners often aim at a refinement which nature repudiates. Say what we will, passion is love in the ore—that is, before it has been purified and stamped with the image and superscription of some individual ; in fact, it is the mere sexual instinct which lies undeveloped in the mind, as gold in the earth, before it is dug forth and given a shape and destination. It may with truth be said that love is not exactly the same in any two minds, male or female, but differs quite as much as, perhaps more than, their features. It differs essentially, also, in men and women, since it bears as much the stamp of sex as they who feel it.

Shakespeare has exhibited it co-existing in the mind with many other passions, and receiving certain modifications from each of them: in some it is delicate, innocent, and childlike, as in Julia, Mariana, and Ophelia; in some it is playful, sportive, and partaking of the warmer instincts, as in Viola and Rosalind; in some it is a compound of desire and vanity, as in Helena; in Beatrice it is mischievous, saucy, imperious, but withal noble and disinterested: in Desdemona it is ignorant of itself, evidently transitory because built on imaginary qualities, and allied too closely with the sway of temperament; in Imogen it is the idolatry of a wife, fond and affectionate, but silly; in Lady Macbeth it is the inborn preference of a fierce and tempestuous woman for one who could at the same time rule her and a kingdom.

There are other characters, both male and female, in Shakespeare in which he has developed his idea of the principle of love. What a man is under the influence of this principle is so difficult to be understood, and still more to explain, that Shakespeare, with all his genius and insight into human nature, has scarcely succeeded, or succeeded at best but once, in presenting us with a vivid and true picture. In drawing a parallel between the sexes, love has been affirmed to take a deeper root in woman than in man. No idea can be more unfounded. Women, it is true, are more easily blighted where the passions are concerned by disappointment, because the structure of their minds, like that of their bodies, is more frail; but when man loves, his love is stronger, fiercer, and yet more enduring than that of woman.

I say when man loves, for in general he only obeys his instincts, and devotes his energies to the ordinary

and inferior concerns of life, business, public or private, or at the highest to mental culture and philosophical studies. Love, however, when it takes possession of a man's soul, when all the passions and faculties are in effervescence, transforms and impresses itself on his whole nature; and though, when the first fever is over, his pride restrains it from blazing forth externally it only burns the more fervently within, till death puts an end to his passion and his life together. This is the love that Shakespeare exhibits in Romeo, though in his character he has connected it with a certain effeminacy, in order perhaps to qualify him to figure with more effect upon the stage. Romantic youths and girls have in all ages been in the habit of declaiming about first love, seeking to persuade themselves and others that their deep natures could take but one impression. Shakespeare shows the groundlessness of this notion in the experience of Romeo. While he is an idle youth, who, having finished his studies and not engaged in politics, finds nothing else to think of but love, he chooses for himself a mistress that his fancy may have something to dwell on. Curiously enough, he lights upon a Capulet—for Rosaline belongs to the house of his enemy—and compels himself to dote on this unsusceptible beauty. To his youthful and ignorant mind, this dreamy preference appeared to be love. But no sooner has he seen Juliet than he feels the difference between an imaginary and a real passion: the scales drop at once from his eyes, the kernel of life has been discovered, the essence of another's being has penetrated his, and the world is henceforward to be dark or bright according to the chances of his love for her.

Throughout his plays Shakespeare has no other

lover of any mark or likelihood. Hamlet fancied he loved Ophelia, and may have felt for her that sort of preference to which the name of love is commonly applied; but it was a very subordinate feeling, a feeling that could be overridden by a weak thirst of revenge. Hamlet's nature is, in fact, too flaccid to grasp any feeling with firmness, or, if any, it is that of friendship for Horatio, and even with that he plays and toys with the indecision of a Sybarite. Hamlet is incapable of any strong passion, and least of all of love. He mopes, he ruminates, he decides, he undecides, he will and he will not, and is ultimately drifted into action by mere chance.

Where else in Shakespeare shall we look for a lover? Not in Othello, who only exhibits the jealousy of a middle-aged gentleman lest his female plaything should be taken from him; not in Claudio or Bassanio, who, though in the latter case with a tinge of romance, are both fortune-hunters; not in Ferdinand or Orlando; not, surely, in Posthumus, who deserves rather a halter than a mistress: but we are forgetting Troilus, who, though somewhat of the craziest, displays the excess of passionate love for a wanton. Through a great rent, however, in a tragic life we obtain one glimpse of a love as noble as what we may imagine to exist in heaven—the love of Brutus for his wife, expressed in language as tender as any that ever flowed from human lip or pen:

<i>Portia.</i>	Dwell I but in the suburbs Of your good pleasure? If it be no more, Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.
<i>Brutus.</i>	You are my true and honourable wife, As dear to me as are the ruddy drops That visit my sad heart.

I have said that love varies according to the idiosyncrasies of those who feel it. The Duke in 'Twelfth Night,' a feeble character, has formed a conception of love such as he imagines might have prevailed in the Golden Age—calm, sweet, innocent, and best suited to his dreamy disposition. Through that perversity of taste which often determines people's preferences, he first conceives a passion for the half-witted and wanton Olivia, but by the influence of his stars, rather than by his own judgment, he obtains a wife more worthy of his gentle nature. While he is in his preliminary state of dotage, he calls on his attendants for music and the repetition of a song he had heard on the previous night :

O fellow, come, the song we had last night.
Mark it, Cesario, it is old and plain ;
The spinsters and the knitters in the sun
And the free maids that weave their thread with bones
Do use to chant it : it is silly sooth,
And dallies with the innocence of love,
Like the gold age.

The song itself is so deliciously sad, so redolent of broken hearts, so tender, delicate, and melancholy, that, though familiar to every reader of Shakespeare, my present purpose cannot dispense with it :

Come away, come away, death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid ;
Fly away, fly away, breath ;
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O, prepare it !
My part of death, no one so true
Did share it.

Not a flower, not a flower sweet,
On my black coffin let there be strown ;
Not a friend, not a friend greet
My poor corpse, where my bones shall be thrown :
A thousand thousand sighs to save,
Lay me, O, where
Sad true lover never find my grave,
To weep there !

In one form of love Shakespeare deals very sparingly—I mean that for married women. The treatment of this subject is attended with great difficulties, because it is seldom that they who cherish such love, or they who are the objects of it, reveal the nature of their feelings. To the preference and attentions of her husband a wife is in most cases accustomed, or at least assumes herself to have a right to them ; but when a man who is not her husband exhibits for her a peculiar preference, follows her footsteps, is infatuated by her beauty, and is willing to run all risks to obtain from her the recognition of his love, she feels intensely flattered, thinking it can proceed from nothing but the supreme fascination of her charms. Even the smallest gifts and slightest attentions are sometimes sufficient to tempt a woman from her allegiance, and what dangers will she not run to meet by stealth the man who pursues her with unlawful love. Night, the proximity of her husband, or of others interested in detecting her, the prospect of shame, or even of ruin, instead of restraining her, appear to be only so many incentives to brave the peril ; modesty, pride, self-respect, the love of children—all are trampled under foot to gratify what appears to her unsophisticated passion. The atmosphere of dread in which she moves, and the breathing of which

makes her heart palpitate and 'knock at her ribs against the use of nature,' imparts a sense of heroism to her guilt and causes her to imagine she will be a sort of martyr if discovered—a martyr to love. This delusion has betrayed many young wives into the perpetration of the last sin a married woman can be guilty of, together with the consequences which, even when undiscovered, are sure to attend it. She lies by her husband's side, conscious that if he knew her guilt he would spurn her from his presence, yet thinking of another, sometimes with pleasure but oftener with repugnance, as the author of her mental suffering—for the heart has a sophistry by which it spares itself.

Shakespeare, in the heyday of his animal spirits, has given us a droll parody on unlawful love-making. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, living in affluent circumstances at Windsor, become, exclusively through those circumstances, the objects of a mock passion to Falstaff. That they have passed the meridian of their beauty is considered by the fat lover an advantage, since they will therefore, he thinks, be flattered by his devotion. But in this case it cost the ladies little trouble to be virtuous. There was something so comic in the situation that they could not resist the pleasure of acting their part in it, running no risk of being touched by slander, as they might had they sported with a younger lover. Elsewhere, however, Shakespeare presents us with two sisters in whom illicit passion is no sham, who bestow their love—such as it is—on the same consummate miscreant, who halt at no stage in the career of guilt, and who, having sacrificed their modesty, which obviously cost them little effort, advanced far beyond that goal, adding to adultery murder and suicide.

But in this picture there is not even the interest which crime sometimes excites. We witness their deaths with as little emotion as we do those of two she-wolves. In this instance, therefore, Shakespeare has thrown away an opportunity of investing with suitable terror the wildest excesses of criminal passion ; women are made to act their worst, to set at nought the dearest ties, to dare the most frightful transgressions, without causing even a shudder by their enormities. This is converting the stage into a sort of human shambles, where blood is shed as a matter of course, rather, as it were, in the way of business than in order to throw the chill shadow of horror over woeful deeds.

There is, indeed, one example more in Shakespeare of illicit love, surrounded with shame and guilt of the deepest dye, but, together with its attendant horrors, it is suggested rather than described. Gertrude, Queen of Denmark, mother to one Hamlet and wife to another, is presented to us by the infinite art of the poet with her evil qualities thrown so skilfully into the background, and sheltered in so great a degree from censure by the arrangement of circumstances, that she is seldom contemplated as a harlot and a murderess. It heightens our commiseration for her unhappy lord that he had bestowed delicate and conscientious love on this profligate woman—love

Of that dignity

That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage.

It needs to be experienced in life to comprehend the subtle metaphysics of guilt, to estimate its power of feigning, the art with which it shifts off the coals

of fire which the receiving of unmerited love casts hourly upon its head :

So loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly.

But could son or father sound the depths of that mother's heart?—

Why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on.

And is not the face of society in all ages studded with Hamlets and Gertrudes? The ghost supplies the explanation :

Lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed,
And prey on garbage.

What sexual passion is, most people believe they know; but what is love? This is a question as difficult to answer as that other question, What is life? which has perplexed the human mind since the beginning of the world. Shakespeare either never attempted to answer it, or, if he did, soon found it beyond his power. He contents himself with describing its effects, the circumstances which attend it, its mode of working, but eschews the attempt to explain its essence. In Shakespeare, as in nature, we find the principle evolving itself ignorantly, blindly, and often wasting its perfume and beauty on the worthless. Troilus's feeling for Cressida is real love, but, her nature being incapable of the passion, she repays it with lust. The same thing is true in the case of Imogen and Posthumus, only here it is the

woman that loves and the man that falls short. But no picture of the way in which love and lust are contrasted in operation is so complete as that which we find in 'Troilus and Cressida.' In singleness of purpose, in truth, sincerity, and disinterested devotion, Troilus resembles Romeo, and deserves, therefore, a mistress no less fond and true than Juliet; but fate presents him with a counterfeit, who acts her part, however, so well that her lover detects in her no sign that the metal he takes for gold is not real and pure. The scene between these two in the orchard is one of the most subtle and profound in Shakespeare. Nothing can exceed the fervour of Troilus's passion, but it is delicate, imaginative, soaring; he is rapt out of himself by the prospect, which he scarcely dares to think real, of gaining immediate possession of his mistress; he dallies with the idea, which is almost too vast to obtain entrance into his belief; he strives to bring it down to the level of credibility; in the first shock of its approach to realisation he fears lest life itself should escape in the process. All this is an enigma to Cressida, who, though she is eager to repay his love with such love as she has to give, contrasts with him as a gnome with a seraph. She regards his rapturous exclamations, his imaginative anticipations of joy, his felicitations to himself on his own happiness, as so much lost time.

There is no shrinking delicacy, no modesty in Cressida, she proclaims her love without circumlocution, and regrets that it is not the woman's part to woo, since men, judging by Troilus, are too slow in making known their feelings. She hints also, as if speaking from experience, that men at best are mere braggarts in love, whose performance always falls short

of their promises. Nothing but the bewilderment of passion can conceal from Troilus that he is holding colloquy with a courtesan, who is as enlightened as if she had had half a dozen husbands. In the extreme imperception of Troilus, Shakespeare is perfectly true to nature, for Cressida by her subtle arts persuades him that she only transgresses the bounds of modesty through resistless love for him. He cannot consequently dream of imputing that to her as a fault which springs entirely from his own influence.

It is an admitted truth that, as in the history of nations the periods of peace and happiness supply the historian with but few materials, so in the experience of the individual love, pure and fortunate in its circumstances, is productive of no events. They who feel it are happy, but to describe the nature of their happiness transcends the power of language. It is otherwise when love is guilty, stormy, doubtful in its nature, stimulated by danger, and terminated by death. Shakespeare is himself doubtful whether he will apply to the passion of Antony and Cleopatra the name of love or lust, and he may well be doubtful, since there were circumstances in the story of these persons which are difficult to be classified. In the true story we find much to perplex our judgment, and still more in Shakespeare's version of it. It seems, however, to result from a careful study of history and the play that Cleopatra is an accomplished courtesan, wholly incapable of love, but skilled in the highest degree in putting on its semblance. The subject suited Shakespeare's genius, which sports about the hidden problem with consummate skill, though here and there verging towards the too palpable absorption of love in lust. Cleopatra had been frequently kindled before she saw

Antony, though her experience brought her in contact with none whose profligacy harmonised so thoroughly with her own. Cæsar regarded her as a harlot, to whose charms he would, to suit his own purposes, make a show of subservience.

But Antony yielded himself up body and soul to her guidance, and she seemed to be content to sway his inclinations as best suited her passions or her interest, for Cleopatra was one of those harlots who never lose sight of the main chance. As Death drew near, his shadow fell between these two lovers, as they would fain be thought, and then the dissembling of the woman began to fail. She had acted her part so successfully that she had probably deceived herself into the belief that her feeling for Antony was love ; but when, through the gloom which surrounded her, she discerned by submission to Octavius one bright glimpse of hope, she sought to detach herself from Antony, and suffered a delegate from the victor to kiss her hand. This indication of treachery being perceived by Antony stung him to madness. In his fury he scourged the representative of Cæsar, and, being as reckless of other men's feelings as he was chary of his own, he sent word to his foe that he might treat his representative with similar brutality. Whatever may have been the nature of the passion between this Roman general and the Egyptian Queen, it exhibited towards its close those fluctuations which distinguish the counterfeit from the true.

Portia and Brutus, being joined in perfect love, found nothing come between them up to the last moment ; they were devoted to each other in their souls, everything in their love was real ; instead of desiring to survive each other, each desired that their

lives should be extinguished together, being thoroughly persuaded that nothing within the vast limits of possibility could make up to one for the loss of the other. One of the finest things in Shakespeare is the hush of suppressed passion with which Brutus announces to Cassius, when their quarrel is over, that Portia is dead. Whatever vices there may have been in Cassius's character, he was able to estimate at its true value the love of Brutus for his noble wife :

Cas. I did not think you could have been so angry.

Bru. O Cassius, I am sick of many griefs.

Cas. Of your philosophy you make no use,
If you give place to accidental evils.

Bru. No man bears sorrow better. Portia is dead.

Cas. Ha ! Portia !

Bru. She is dead.

Cas. How 'scaped I killing when I cross'd you so ?
O insupportable and touching loss !

Here we have the requiem of pure love, which in its infinite simplicity offers so touching a contrast to the troubled and guilty termination of Antony and Cleopatra's intercourse. The grandest and most beautiful mythus in the symbolical religion of Hellas is that which represents love as preceding the creation of the universe. This idea lies in the heart, as it were, of the most sacred of sacred things. To originate life in all its infinite forms the intellect truly regards as the highest effort of love, since, if we can imagine a chronology in such things, love must have preceded in the Divine mind the beginning of all existences, organic or inorganic, intellectual or material. Throughout nature love, when unobstructed, produces beauty and harmony, which united constitute perfect happiness. The teeming imagination of the Greeks con-

ceived all nature as instinct with music, an idea too analogous to the grandeur of Shakespeare's mind to escape its grasp :

Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold :
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins :
Such harmony is in immortal souls ;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

Conformably to the taste of his age, Shakespeare, when he talks of love, generally interweaves with his language quite as much conceit as poetry. This implies, however, no lack of passion or earnestness, but submission merely to the prevalent fashion, which, as Rowe observes, displayed itself still more obtrusively in the pulpit than on the stage. From the lips of Romeo, if from those of any lover, we might expect a true description of love freed from anything extrinsic, and laying itself bare to the intellect in all its purity. This is what he says of it :

Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs ;
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes ;
Being vex'd, a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears :
What is it else ? a madness most discreet,
A choking gall, and a preserving sweet.

Is our conception of love much refined or enlarged by this account ? or by this other :

Love, first learned in a lady's eyes,
Lives not alone immured in the brain ;
But, with the motion of all elements,
Courses as swift as thought in every power,
And gives to every power a double power,
Above their functions and their offices.

It adds a precious seeing to the eye ;
A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind ;
A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound,
When the suspicious head of theft is stopp'd :
Love's feeling is more soft and sensible
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails ;
Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste :
For valour, is not Love a Hercules,
Still climbing trees in the Hesperides ?
Subtle as Sphinx ; as sweet and musical
As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair ;
And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods
Make heaven drowsy with the harmony.

Instead of an explanation we have here a torrent of metaphors and similes which excites our fancy, but without greatly enlightening our understanding, though we may gather from it that Shakespeare's theory of love was, when he wrote it, profoundly sensual. It is all built on sex, and if the pleasures of the mind and soul be alluded to, it is only that by their aid the raptures of sense may be exalted. From the beginning of the world this theory of Shakespeare has commanded the belief of the human race ; Antigone, Jephthah's daughter, as well as Andromache and the wife of Odysseus, accepted it, and if we discover in Haemon something beyond and above it, the inference to be thence drawn is only an additional proof of the correctness of my view respecting the superior force of man's love. The noblest woman imagined by Greek poetry believed, like the author of the Book of Job, that the loss of husband and children might be compensated for by having others ; but the man having lost the woman he loved could discover in the whole universe no compensation for his loss, and therefore voluntarily breathed forth his soul at her feet.

Did we possess a biography of Shakespeare as complete as the confessions of Jean-Jacques or of St. Augustine, several incidents in the plays would probably be found to have grown out of his personal experience. No one can have read 'King John' without having been struck, or I should rather perhaps say shocked, by the language of Faulconbridge in the dialogue with his mother. Having been knighted by the king, and scorning to trace his origin to his supposed parent, he extorts by 'rumbustious' pleading from his mother the secret of his birth :

Lady F. Hast thou conspired with thy brother too,
That for thine own gain shouldst defend mine honour ?
What means this scorn, thou most untoward knave ?

Bast. Knight, knight, good mother, Basilisco-like.
What ! I am dubb'd ! I have it on my shoulder.
But, mother, I am not sir Robert's son ;
I have disclaim'd sir Robert and my land ;
Legitimation, name and all is gone :
Then, good my mother, let me know my father ;
Some proper man, I hope : who was it, mother ?

Lady F. Hast thou denied thyself a Faulconbridge ?

Bast. As faithfully as I deny the devil.

Lady F. King Richard Cœur-de-lion was thy father :
By long and vehement suit I was seduced
To make room for him in my husband's bed :
Heaven lay not my transgression to my charge !
Thou art the issue of my dear offence,
Which was so strongly urged past my defence.

Is the Richard spoken of in this scene the representative of Shakespeare himself, and is Lady Faulconbridge Mrs. d'Avenant ? Aubrey tells us that the poet on his way to and from Stratford used to pass through Oxford, put up at a certain inn, and make love to the landlady, who is said to have been very beautiful. Among her children there was one boy thought to

resemble the poet, who had consented to be his godfather. Once when the poet had just alighted at the house, the boy was sent for from school, and a neighbour, seeing him hastening home, inquired what made him in such a hurry. 'I am going to see my godfather,' he replied. 'Don't take God's name in vain,' said the neighbour, with a smile. This lad, afterwards Sir William d'Avenant, is said to have been as proud of his parentage as Faulconbridge of having been descended from Cœur-de-lion. There is much in the tone of Shakespeare's sentiments as they display themselves in his works to give countenance to this story, which, whether true or false, is unquestionably quite in keeping with the manners of the age, and more especially with those of the theatre. It could hardly be of lapses like this, in which even Raleigh, the English Bayard, had set the stage-players an example, that Shakespeare says :

Thence is it that my name receives a brand,

since neither Sidney, Leicester, nor Essex took any pains to ward off from himself suspicion of a guilt which he regarded rather as a triumph than as an offence. Sidney, no doubt, in his poetical rhapsodies invests love with qualities found not in nature but in the dreams of Plato; though, in truth, the blaze of poetry only flashed like a bog-fire over the slough of sense.

Several poets of more fancy than feeling have sought to strip love of its impassioned character, and to invest it with attributes belonging rather to a spiritual nature than to a human being. But this is to confound two existences. Shakespeare intended in 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona' to show forth the

distinctive beauties of love and friendship ; but when love comes in, friendship soon makes way for him. Both love, however, and friendship are ill conceived and worse carried out, though it may be he intended by the very name of Proteus to signify the changeableness of the man's nature. When the friends are talking before parting, we see the hold Marlowe's story had taken of the public mind : speaking of a book on which Proteus might make oath, Valentine says :

That's on some shallow story of deep love :
How young Leander cross'd the Hellespont.

Pro. That's a deep story of a deeper love.

Pro. Yet writers say, as in the sweetest bud
The eating canker dwells, so eating love
Inhabits in the finest wits of all.

Val. And writers say, as the most forward bud
Is eaten by the canker ere it blow,
Even so by love the young and tender wit
Is turn'd to folly.

Since maids, in modesty, say 'no' to that
Which they would have the profferer construe 'ay.'

Shakespeare was a young man when he wrote this scene, and was trying his hand at comedy. There is too much affectation in Julia when with her maid, and perhaps rather too much plain speaking when alone, save that what she says to herself is merely what she thinks :

Poor wounded name ! my bosom as a bed
Shall lodge thee till thy wound be thoroughly heal'd.

Then, improving on this idea, she takes the fragments of the letters, one containing her name, the other that of Proteus, and says :

Thus will I fold them upon one another :
Now kiss, embrace, contend, do what you will.

Having thus carried her ideas to the goal of love, Julia soon afterwards disguises herself and elopes after her lover. She is a sweet, true character, but the play in which she acts displays little passion :

O, how this spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by and by a cloud takes all away !

Love is like a child,
That longs for every thing that he can come by.

'Tis pity love should be so contrary ;
And thinking on it make me cry ' alas ! '

In the attempt to paint heroic friendship Shakespeare makes Valentine give up Silvia to Proteus, which is unnatural ; besides, Silvia herself would have to be consulted. Julia excites more interest than Silvia, perhaps because the one is triumphant, the other unfortunate almost to the end.

In ' A Midsummer Night's Dream ' Shakespeare has some sweet passages on Love. But none so sweet as that which is familiar to every reader :

The course of true love, etc.

To one enduring the misery of being crossed in love, the thought comes naturally that what happens to him happens universally. In his own unhappiness he dares not believe that any lover was ever happy ; indeed, happiness is in all cases so fleeting that they who are blest have scarcely time to feel they are so before the surge of fortune bears both them and their bliss into oblivion. The sources of disappointment in

love are still more numerous than Shakespeare makes them. No doubt difference in rank blights many a passion, but in most cases the blight is a cause of less unhappiness than success would be ; for ill-assorted matches may almost be said never to lead to happiness, since difference in mental culture, in degrees of refinement, and the general conception of life disqualify the members of different classes for living together. The unsuitableness of age and youth is no less obvious. The interference of relatives, which may be well or ill founded, is a thing of doubtful character, being as often good as bad. As to the ordinary misfortunes of life—war, sickness, death, they as often ward off misery as happiness. The accumulation, however, of common-places on the liability of love to disappointment has given rise to a passage of the greatest beauty.

A great portion of the connexion between Helena and Hermia is highly poetical, but is scarcely natural, because when one woman takes away a lover from another, whether with or against her will, the jealousy arising out of the mere fact destroys at once all friendship and admiration. Where Helena, therefore, is eloquent on Hermia's fascinations she is at variance with nature, and could not have inquired of her by what means she inspired Demetrius with love. There is much fancy in this part of the play, but no philosophy except by accident. Up to a certain point, Helena expresses great love for Hermia, but afterwards, when the force of jealousy has unlocked her heart, she brings forth bitter reminiscences, saying that Hermia had always been a shrew even when she had been a schoolgirl, so that the figure of the double cherry was after all only a pretty conceit. Among men it was a saying of old, *amicus usque ad aras*, and it is an

eternal truth among women, *amica usque ad amorem*. This is the Rubicon, which a woman only passes when in her heart she has declared internecine war against her female rivals. Helena came slowly to this decision, but was saved the consequences by fairy influence.

Even in this part of the dialogue the shrew peeps out: speaking of Demetrius she says 'I give him curses, yet he gives me love.' The Athenian ladies, it is known, did swear, though it was only by the goddesses, while the Laconian dames swore like troopers by Castor and Pollux. But the curse is something more than swearing, and was seldom had recourse to except by the worshippers of Hecate.

When Hermia had departed Helena let out the truth which had been pent up before. Few women sincerely praise other women's beauty, even when it does not stand in the way of their love, but Helena's praise was hypocritical. She could see nothing in Hermia's face which could justify Demetrius' desertion of herself for Hermia, though when talking with Hermia she affected to think so. She now comforts herself with the reflection that everybody in Athens, except Demetrius, knew that she was quite as beautiful as her friend. Her spaniel-like devotion to a man who preferred another is quite in nature. I have seen many women do the same, and, what is more surprising, I have seen some men do so. In this case, however, love is often turned to revenge, but conceals its change till it has subdued the reluctance of the woman, and then, when she is in its power, devotes the remainder of its life to torturing her. It is a proverb, 'Hell has no fury like a woman scorned,' but a man scorned proves quite as great a fury, I mean in many cases. Shakespeare was still thinking of the story of Venus and

Adonis when he wrote the dialogue between Helena and Demetrius in the wood. Though she strives to put on a show of modesty, her whole conduct is itself immodesty, since she is not restrained even by the threat of violation, and that delivered in language which would have cooled the ardour of a less infatuated woman. She seems, in fact, to be suffering from an access of nymphomania which excites the disgust of Demetrius. Demetrius might have been less cross without any detriment to his character. Afterwards Lysander acts much the same part, only his language is far less gross and abusive; he applies to Hermia all the offensive epithets which could with respectful decency be applied to a woman. True he was alienated from her by magic, but magic could not supply him with a vocabulary unknown to his memory. He used only the terms which he would at any time have applied to a woman he disliked.

In 'Twelfth Night' the Duke in his first speech addresses Love in verses full of meaning :

O spirit of love ! how quick and fresh art thou,
That, notwithstanding thy capacity
Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,
Of what validity and pitch soe'er,
But falls into abatement and low price,
Even in a minute.

This Duke is one of Shakespeare's most maundering characters, totally deficient in logic, but rich in fancy, with which he plays as a child does with a rattle. He may be supposed to have a meaning in what he says, but, if so, he expresses it so mystically that it is highly difficult to discover what it is. He is as far to seek in guessing his own meaning as in judging of Olivia, whom he supposes to be refined and spiritual,

whereas she is in a remarkable degree gross and material. Her contempt for him is based on the false estimate which she knows he has formed of her. Had he wooed her like a sensible gallant she would have capitulated at once.

It is true that love is often conceived at first sight, and Viola may be supposed to have loved the Duke as soon as she saw him; his person may have pleased her, though his sentiments and language belong to a man effeminate and silly, not knowing his own mind, or even his own meaning when he talks. As Proteus employs Julia disguised as a youth to make love to Silvia, so this silly Duke employs Viola as his representative to Olivia. It is a pity that the structure of the play renders this fooling necessary, for nothing can be more absurd.

Shakespeare was unmindful of nature when he had recourse to such a device. Viola must be supposed to be small, for the Duke, addressing her as Cesario, calls her a lad, and says that everything was womanly in her appearance. Yet the circumstances of the play are scarcely reconcilable with this view, since she is confounded with her brother, who must either be a diminutive man and extremely effeminate in appearance, or she must be a tall, masculine woman, and so not answer the description of the Duke. While suggesting, therefore, the delicacy of her aspect, Shakespeare disparages her brother. That which rather favours the idea of her masculine figure is that she is challenged to fight a duel, which could not be if she was like a lad, for men do not fight with boys.

When Olivia asks Viola how the Duke loves her, she replies, with tears, groans, and sighs, which were not what Olivia wanted. The simulated manhood and

contempt of Viola awakened her desires, and so would the Duke had he understood her character.

Viola is to be supposed to understand herself at least, and to be able to give a shrewd guess at the feelings of other women. What these really are I pretend not to set down here, but this is what Shakespeare thought :

How easy is it for the proper-false
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms !
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we !
For such as we are made of, such we be.

Women are frail enough, but with all their frailty they are clever enough to deceive and overreach men. In truth, therefore, the more we disparage women the sillier we make ourselves appear, just as soldiers do when they say their enemies are weak and cowardly, which takes away the merit of conquering them ; even the worst men take no credit to themselves for seducing a prostitute.

The Duke in his melancholy moralising way utters many truths, which, being addressed to a supposed youth, hit nevertheless the passion of Viola. He thinks she has loved, which she confesses, and says it was a person about his age ; on which he exclaims 'Too old, by heaven !' Shakespeare then appears to speak from his own experience : he had matched with a woman eight years older than himself, and, if what is here said may be regarded as a confession, soon repented of his choice :

Let still the woman take
An elder than herself : so wears she to him,
So sways she level in her husband's heart :
For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,
Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,

More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,
Than women's are. . . .
Then let thy love be younger than thyself,
Or thy affection cannot hold the bent;
For women are as roses, whose fair flower
Being once display'd, doth fall that very hour.

When the Duke dispraises men and praises women he is in one fit, out of which he jumps into another and says that women cannot feel so strong a passion as men, and goes on thus :

They lack retention.

Alas, their love may be call'd appetite—

which does not even rise to the level of passion. This idea is as absurd as the other, to which it is meant to be a parallel.

Viola suggests even in her male habit that she loves the Duke, who naturally misunderstands her. She then feigns the story of a sister,

She never told her love, etc.

After which she tells the Duke that women vow less, but love more than men.

Rosalind loves Orlando for his strength in wrestling. Celia says if he keeps his promises in love as he had exceeded them in wrestling, his mistress would be happy. Rosalind thinks so too, and calls him her child's father. The love throughout this play is peculiarly material, more so perhaps than in any other. Rosalind is thoroughly wanton, and yet chaste, though she scarcely knows how to keep her desires within bounds. Her disguise enables her to enjoy kissing and toying without stint, and she gives full rein to her inclinations.

Though the play is one of the most interesting in Shakespeare, it is one of the least modest, for every woman speaks out in the plainest language what she thinks, and Rosalind has accustomed the clown to use with her such unmeasured language that he is not to be restrained within the bounds of decency. Here Adonis should have been called in, and made to teach the poet the difference between love and gross passion, which is lost sight of throughout the play.

ESSAY X

PHILOSOPHY OF SHAKESPEARE: RELIGION—FATE

THOUGH Shakespeare be a philosophical poet, it is difficult to bring together such of his ideas and opinions as belong to philosophy, or indeed to ascertain what his philosophy is. One thing is clear enough—namely, that it is unsystematic—which is not so much owing to any obstacles presented by the nature of dramatic composition as to the character of his mind, impatient of all shackles, but, above all perhaps, of the shackles of system. That there exists a deep basis of thought extending beneath the vast and varied surface of his writings, invisible generally, but in some parts rising, as it were, and exposing itself to view, is what no one will probably doubt; but I by no means entertain the belief that I have discovered all the elements of which that basis consists, or even that they are discoverable by any amount of investigation. Strictly speaking, there exists and can exist but one science—the science of nature—though for convenience we apply the term to many distinct and often very small sections of this all-grasping science, which must still in Shakespeare be regarded as one, for poetry, like the sun's light, considers itself privileged to flash at will round the whole of this pendent globe, to illuminate and reveal by its brilliancy everything it contains—good or beautiful.

Lucretius undertakes to write of all nature, both material and intellectual, and throws his glance with equal fearlessness over gods and men. Shakespeare, without professing to do so, yet does the same, though in a different way and perhaps in a different spirit, for so far as I can discern he is never impious nor presumptuous enough to judge dogmatically of what lies beyond the reach of his understanding. He has indeed been accused of atheism by a writer who derives his arguments rather from what he does not find in the plays than from what he does. Had Shakespeare put forward any theory on this subject, it would probably have been that there is and can be no science of the unknown or theology, since all who have a due sense of our ignorance reverently abstain from professing any farther knowledge of God than that He exists. We may and do say 'God is Love,' but make by this no advance towards comprehending the divine nature, since we know as little what love thus contemplated is as what God is. Yet it is by its participation in this unsearchable principle that Shakespeare's intellect is chiefly distinguished; he loves everything, from the inconceivable Author of his own being to the wild flower on the waste, the pebbly beds of streams, nay the very bog-fires that sport with the traveller by night. For the individuals of his own species, he has an inextinguishable tenderness, which, gushing forth everywhere in his works, constitutes their resistless charm. One of the Hebrew writers, attributing his own kindly nature to the Deity, says 'Whom he loveth, them he chasteneth'; and all pre-eminently great minds are often betrayed into the expression of anger against their species, by the weakness and ignorance through which it brings so much misery on itself.

Yet our ignorance of many things is no reproach to us, our minds being by their nature incapable of comprehending what existence, for example, is, what substance, what intellect, or how two beings can exist at the same time in one place, which is yet an indisputable truth, since wherever matter is, God is. The highest conception of the human mind appears to be, that God is a universal conscious intelligence, consequently that He is more profoundly conscious of our thoughts than we are ourselves. They spring indeed, so to speak, through His being into ours, and, though eternal in their essence, become phenomenal and fleeting in their forms by passing through our intellects. Shakespeare's mind was thickly peopled with these and such-like ideas ; sometimes circumfused with doubt, sometimes flashing forth with innate splendour, as if fresh from the fountain of truth. He had imbibed, no one knows how or where, strange opinions respecting the visible universe, which had been put forward long before his time by some Eastern philosophers, and which, travelling with the sun, had taken up their residence in the mind of Paul of Tarsus ; namely, that matter itself, together with everything finite, possesses but a show of being, and will ultimately be absorbed and lost in the Divine Nature, that God may be all in all :

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,¹
Leave not a rack behind.

¹ This line occurs before the beginning of the passage, but for the sake of completeness I have introduced it here, instead of another, which every reader of Shakespeare will remember.

As concerns the inheritors of this globe, Shakespeare's Protean philosophy presents itself under so many varying forms that we know not to which we ought to attribute stability, or if to any. Now, the soul is immortal :

Such harmony is in immortal souls ;

and now it springs to light out of sleep, glitters on the vast plain of existence for a while, and then is lost again in the sleep out of which it emerged :

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

No mind is, perhaps, unvisited by such misgivings, which in some are only so many April clouds that melt and dissolve into brightness as the intellect pours its warmth and light upon them, while in others they seem to thicken as time moves on :

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle !
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more : it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Our conceptions of life depend necessarily on the amount of our intellect ; the small-minded and superficial content themselves with those common notions which, with the stamp of orthodoxy upon them, pass current in the everyday world, while they who own depths of thought which plummet never sounded

form for themselves theories approximating perhaps to the truth. Whence we obtain our idiosyncrasies, our souls' features, our characters, is as little known as whence we derive our colour, symmetry, and stature. Principles appear to run down, like lines of light, from generation to generation in certain families and tribes, perhaps more or less in all, and these constituting an influence favourable to the reception of certain opinions and beliefs, have often been confounded with ideas supposed therefore to be innate. Philosophy is no stranger to the opinion that human souls are eternal *a parte ante*, as well as *a parte post*, and bear therefore along with them, from generation to generation, traces of the experience they have accumulated during their previous stages of being. The more boldly we penetrate into the recesses of our own minds, the more indications we appear to discover that we are intimately connected with a past consciousness, which, however, becomes indistinct or vanishes as the clear light of the understanding is brought to bear upon it. If consciousness be inherent in our material nature, we might impart to the above theory some show of probability by maintaining that, the vehicle of consciousness being made up of a certain number of particles, some portion of the thing conveyed must belong to each, and therefore, come whence they may, they must carry along with them for ever traces of all the modifications of consciousness with which they are successively brought into contact. In this fanciful way, some philosophers have endeavoured to account for various phenomena observable among mankind: thus some races are incurably superstitious, others are prolific in ideas of beauty, others are distinguished for their powers of dry reasoning, others for courage

and unflinching cruelty, and these qualities of race are believed by many never to lose their force till they are neutralised by mixture with other races.

When research shall teach us what the soul is, we may be able to explain why no two souls are alike: why Hamlet differs from Othello, and Romeo from both; why Richard is a human wolf, Macbeth a logical tiger, and Iago an incarnation of jocund fiendishness.

We find in Shakespeare results of investigation, though the process be nowhere carried on in our presence. As we stand amid the ocean of life, which in his plays surges about us, we perceive nearly all the phases of being with which the actual world makes us acquainted in the course of tedious years. Life begins and ends in our sight; we behold the images of the visible universe rushing in upon the soul, taking shape there, and then issuing forth arrayed in all the beauty with which matter can be clothed. Here guilt runs along in dark currents, to be swallowed up and lost in the formless ruins of oblivion; there goodness, like a beneficent flood, reflects all the beauty of the noontide hour; while at times we are admitted into the pavilion of sleep, and witness all the shows and changes which it unfolds before the imagination. Shakespeare's philosophy, it may be said, assumes as we consider it an extremely fanciful character, now basing its conclusions on the most airy subtleties, on careless speculations, or inferences drawn from unstable phenomena; but to think thus would be to do him injustice. He embodies his philosophy chiefly in action, or in those natural reflections by which the pauses in the surge of action are necessarily separated.

It is indeed uncertain, as I have elsewhere shown, what opinions he put forward as his own and what as those which he desired to decry and overthrow. Like Plato, he is often at a loss what to think on the subject of justice, or affects to be at a loss in order that he may provide himself with an occasion to extirpate some opinion which he observed to be in vogue. On the subject of continence and incontinence the world has always professed one opinion and held to another, putting on the show of severity in the hope of concealing the laxity of its conduct. Shakespeare has doubts whether society possesses the right to interfere at all in this matter, and, having made in 'Lear' an allusion to its cruelty, undertakes in 'Measure for Measure' to exhibit it in all its hideousness. The design of this play may no doubt be regarded from different points of view, and as it is considered in this or that light be thought to point at this or that conclusion. Many problems are attempted to be solved in it, though the most important, if not the most prominent, be the nature of justice as it is contemplated, and has nearly always been contemplated, in the fluctuating forms of civil polity successively prevalent among mankind. No matter how, when, or with whom the story originated, the play opens with an exhibition of the alliance of authority with injustice which has few parallels in the authentic history of our species. The reader no doubt remembers it well: Claudio, the passive hero of the drama, having anticipated the rights of marriage with his affianced bride, is, for that assumed offence, condemned to death; the spectator has no time, though the reader has, to consider how irreconcilable with probability

so insolent a trampling on the laws of justice is in a Christian country and in modern times. Shakespeare saw the greatest among his contemporaries condemned to death for listening to a fool, and, not being able to make use in his play of that political incident, chose in its stead another, no less monstrous. Raleigh, in the hope of mitigating the King's ferocity, admits the injustice of his sentence to be just, an act of weakness which Claudio in part imitates, though he soon discovers the folly of his admission and timidly hints at the truth.

Lucio. Why, how now, Claudio ! Whence comes this restraint ?

Claud. From too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty :
As surfeit is the father of much fast,
So every scope by the immoderate use
Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,
Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,
A thirsty evil ; and when we drink we die.

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The new deputy now for the duke—
Whether it be the fault and glimpse of newness,
Or whether that the body public be
A horse whereon the governor doth ride,
Who, newly in the seat, that it may know
He can command, lets it straight feel the spur ;
Whether the tyranny be in his place,
Or in his eminence that fills it up,
I stagger in :—but this new governor
Awakes me all the enrolled penalties
Which have, like unscour'd armour, hung by the wall
So long that nineteen zodiacs have gone round
And none of them been worn ; and, for a name,
Now puts the drowsy and neglected act
Freshly on me : 'tis surely for a name.

While 'Measure for Measure' was taking shape in Shakespeare's mind, alive to all the influences

of the time, authority was making preparations for perpetrating one of the greatest acts of injustice which have left their stain on English history. How near the real circumstances the poet might have ventured to approach we are unable to decide; perhaps he spoke out as plainly as regard for his own head would permit, for certainly the English people of 1604 must have been strangely blunt in their understandings if they did not perceive that Raleigh was Claudio, and that by the sanguinary Lord Deputy no other than Robert Cecil could be meant. From the days of Pontius Pilate downwards, in every channel through which supreme power had forced its way, justice had had so little to do with the relations between the governors and the governed that Shakespeare thought no fiction too extravagant to indicate the actual state of things. Every honest heart in England was throbbing with apprehension for the fate of Claudio; the hunch-back Angelo, as he passed to and fro between Windsor and Whitehall, inspired in all who beheld him a mixed feeling of aversion and terror, and when Elizabeth Throgmorton and Mary Sidney had played unsuccessfully the part of Isabella, the Metropolis looked daily for the erection of that scaffold in Palace Yard which a few years later was polluted with the victim's innocent blood.

I have said that several problems are attempted to be solved in this play; but more than once the poet's philosophy breaks down, proves unequal to the task it has undertaken, and leaves the subject involved, if possible, in thicker darkness than before. Shakespeare was least of all men qualified to disparage the value of life, with whose endless sources of joy and happiness his mind had familiarised itself. Doubtless

it is easier to draw startling pictures of calamity and suffering, to suggest ideas of sublimity by arraying the destructive forces of nature against man, than to evolve out of circumstances a brilliant conception of human happiness. But when many topics lie before him, Shakespeare is seldom inclined to select the easiest; he has not done so in this instance, but undertakes by an aggregate of rhetoric, argument, and sophistry to convince a man in youth and health, loving and being beloved, with most of fortune's highest gifts at his command, that it is really better to turn his back on all these things and become, as he expresses it, a kneaded clod, than to revel in the enjoyment of Nature's bounty, rendered doubly brilliant by hope and invested with stability by virtue. The speaker in this case is immediately felt not to be in earnest, but only to be spinning sophisms to display his ingenuity. In Hamlet it is otherwise. His discontent is genuine, his morbid constitution, both of mind and body, inclines him to look upon the wrong side of things, to regard this brave o'erhanging firmament fretted with golden fires as a mere pestilent congregation of vapours, to be delighted neither with man nor woman, to envy in theory the Hindoo yoghi who burnt himself alive before the Hellenic conqueror while he is withheld from following his example by fear of the evils he may have to cope with when he shall have shuffled off this mortal coil. Here there is no shamming, no heaping of words together for effect, no shallow playing with figures of speech; it is constitutional gloom allied closely with weakness and effeminacy that speaks, while to strike one fatal blow is less within the compass of possibility than to heap Pelion upon Ossa.

Man's apprehensions, however, of punishments after death are rather proportioned to his constitutional timidity than to the transgressions of which he may have been guilty. Hamlet's course of life had, so far as we know, been marked by few deviations from the path of rectitude ; Claudio's by still fewer ; so that had Eacus been the judge, he would at worst have been sentenced to accompany Thersites and other moderate offenders in Hades. Yet the agonies conjured up in his imagination by the prospect of immediate death have no recorded parallel :

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where ;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot ;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod ; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice ;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world ; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling : 'tis too horrible !
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

In Hamlet the doctrine of Purgatory is substituted for that of Hell, to which however Shakespeare often alludes satirically as 'the everlasting bonfire.' If what is supposed to take place in our globe be thought to take place likewise in every other, we behold when we look forth into the firmament by night nothing but an infinite multitude of shining hells, where the souls peculiar to each star or planet are shut up in some cavern near its centre to be burned and otherwise

tortured to all eternity. To believe this is to have formed a hideous theory of the creation of God, which as far as our intellects will carry us is invariably discovered to be instinct with goodness and happiness. The exceptions we seem to perceive, while sufficient to perplex our understandings, may all be completely reconcilable with the vast plan of the universe which we must suppose to exist in the mind of God. Our most philosophical and practical conceptions, viewed in contrast with the beauty and sublimity of the universe, are only so many pretty fancies gliding like bog-fires over the infinite abyss of existence.

Sickly fancies like these, no less prevalent in ancient than in modern times, awoke the scorn of Lucretius, who exclaims

What has this bugbear death to frighten man,
If souls can die as well as bodies can ?

But his contemporaries were as little soothed by his fierce declamation as was Claudio's mind by the sophistical rant of the ducal friar, which occasionally becomes comic through its extravagance. Through the whole mental element of Shakespeare's age the doctrine had penetrated, that guilt contracted by one person may be justly expiated by the sufferings of another, which rendered the task of the confessor in dealing with the fear of death all but impracticable. To plead innocence or even virtue proves of no avail ; someone else has perpetrated crime, and fate determines that we are therefore to be subjected to punishment. In this tenet originated the mental tortures of Claudio, countenanced by the theology of the seventeenth century and linked inextricably with the belief in fate.

However great or clear may have been his intellect, Shakespeare found all his logic at fault when the course of his reasoning brought him face to face with this dark problem. No metaphysical spectre conjured forth from the depths of speculation has ever haunted the human mind like this. Everything in nature appears to be appointed, regulated, fixed, by laws coeval and co-extensive with nature ; but man's mind claims exemption from allegiance to the power that governs everything else. The divine influence stops and ceases to act when it approaches this hallowed circle, in which a power distinct from that of God reigns paramount, rejecting all idea of control, but recognising, in consequence of its absolute freedom, the existence of its responsibility. In considering this question we can only defend ourselves against the force of destiny by insisting on a liberty as complete as I have just described. Nothing must determine our will but the will itself ; no influence, good or evil, must reach the soul from without ; it must be free to act, to think, to reason, to judge, and must likewise be able to comprehend the nature and quality of all actions before it acts, to estimate all motives, to search into the hidden springs of all beings by which it is surrounded, that it may neither be betrayed into evil by perversity nor into error by ignorance. Is this state of things within us reconcilable with our intellectual experience ? Can any man claim for himself so absolute a dominion over his own internal forces ?

Throughout Shakespeare's works, or nearly throughout, we detect traces of a faith in the subjugation of the human mind by that unknown something which the Greeks denominated *Moir*a or *Pe*promene, and believed to be superior even to Zeus himself.

To show how congenial this belief is to the human mind, we need only remember that it constituted the pivot on which speculation turned, as well in Ancient India as in Egypt, where Brahm and Phtha, constituting the basis of being, determined the nature of all forms of existence emanating from them. In modern language the word Divinity has by a gentle euphemism been substituted for Destiny :

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

Here the direction of human action is taken out of the hands of men by an overruling power, which must, at the same time, take upon itself the responsibility, as well as the irresistible influence. But this sort of pious impiety springs obviously in Shakespeare from a reverential feeling and earnest solicitude to avoid even the appearance of withdrawing in theory human nature from subjection to God. Still, strictly interpreted, it is as complete a profession of fatalism as that of Hobbes, who declares unscrupulously that if the thief be destined to steal, the executioner is destined to hang him.

Hobbes may have been sincere in his sophistical reasoning, but Shakespeare, if pressed on the subject, will not, though he also may be sincere, hold to the conclusions suggested by his premises, and maintain that man is an irresponsible creature ; he will rather fall back on the doctrine of original sin, or any other contradiction, than teach that man is not answerable for his conduct and suffers chastisement when he has done amiss, even in this world :

We still have judgment here ; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor.

No act of wickedness or folly, or even of imprudence, escapes in Shakespeare punishment of some kind, often, however, wholly disproportioned to the offence ; for Juliet and Romeo encounter the same fate as Macbeth, Iago, and Richard : I mean as far as their bodies are concerned ; for these criminals, whom antiquity would have classed with Tityus, Sisypheus, and Tantalus, are thrust forth from life in remorse and agony, while death closes the eyes of the lovers in a paroxysm of rapture.

If we embody fate in the shape of death, it obviously comes to all, though its form and significance vary with everyone that dies, because the life that it closes has inevitably varied. Almost every prevalent belief in the seventeenth century implied more or less distinctly the subjection of man to invincible necessity. If some great criminal who would have derived pleasure from repeating the banquet of Thyestes was to be visited by Nemesis, a bright and menacing star issued from the depths of space to give intimation to 'the world's poor people' that the act of justice was at hand. Again, the raging of pestilences, the occurrence of seditions, the breaking forth of terrible wars, the existence of unnatural enmities between brother and brother, or between father and son, were sure to be preceded by portents and prodigies in the heavens.

Gloucester. These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us : though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects : love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide : in cities, mutinies ; in countries, discord ; in palaces, treason ; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father.

Long before he wrote this passage Shakespeare had given expression to the pity, closely akin to scorn,

with which he beheld the grovelling superstition of his time :

Look, how the world's poor people are amazed
At apparitions, signs and prodigies,
Whereon with fearful eyes they long have gazed,
Infusing them with dreadful prophecies.

Later in life, when his philosophy had gained more consistency, and his contempt become more robust, he ventured on a plainer style of speaking, though he still considered it politic to put forth his opinion through a character whose teaching he might disclaim :

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune,—often the surfeit of our own behaviour,—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars : as if we were villains by necessity ; fools by heavenly compulsion ; knaves, thieves, and treachers, by spherical predominance ; drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence ; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.

Shakespeare clearly means us to accept this as implying a refutation of all he may ever have said in favour of fatality. The speaker, conscious that he must take the responsibility of his deeds, so that he can triumph on 'this bank and shoal of time,' resolves, like Macbeth, to jump the life to come. The course of action he has traced out for himself appears so brilliant, as seen through the eyes of ambition, that he burns to obliterate from his mind all distinction between good and evil, though he scoffs at the popular persuasion that man is what he is by a divine thrusting on. 'Tut!' he exclaims scornfully, 'I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.'

Euripides intimates by the lips of Jocasta his dissent from the form which belief in fate had assumed

among the tragic poets his predecessors. He had probably discussed this question with Socrates, who is thought to have aided him in the composition of his plays, and if so his influence may be surely supposed to have chiefly exerted itself in giving a loftier character to his philosophy. In his scheme of thought, Peppomene holds back her iron hand, till man invites her to begin the process which Shakespeare denominates a divine thrusting on.

Laius consulting the oracle at Delphi respecting his childless state is warned by the god not to desire children, since, if he should have a son, that son would be his murderer. Having set the oracle at nought, a son is born to him, and all the crimes and sorrows of the house of Labdacus ensue. Here man is made the arbiter of his own destiny; the turning-point in the stream of events is placed before him; everything is left to depend on an act of his will; he may be happy with one drawback; but, if not content to abide by the award of heaven, the consequences of his self-indulgence will be strictly visited on him and his offspring.

Some faint shadow of the same theory is discoverable in Shakespeare, where, as in Euripides, the doctrine is put forward by a woman. Her language, however, is not a little enigmatical:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to heaven: the fated sky
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.

ESSAY XI

PHILOSOPHY: CHARACTER—PHYSICAL SCIENCE—
SLEEP AND DREAMS

THOUGH Shakespeare, however, like Euripides, may suggest a seeming solution of the great problem, he cannot escape from the subtle entanglements of *Pepromene*. In his plays, as in the world, men act in obedience to the promptings of their inclinations, their dispositions, their characters, and the decisions of their intellect. But a man's disposition, for example, is not of his own making. It is transmitted to him, partly through the same process as his life, partly through the air he breathes, the climate he inhabits, the water he drinks, the food he eats, and the human beings by whom his opening mind is enlightened or obscured. The mingling of the elements in us, which the Greeks expressed by the word 'crasis,' can obviously in no way be influenced by our own will, and yet out of this spring our passions, our desires, our particular hopes and fears, and that modification of our nature which I have spoken of above as our disposition. Shakespeare when considering these things, sometimes by themselves, sometimes in connexion with the physical laws of external nature, is so deeply perplexed that he falls into a wilderness of paradoxes, if not of contradictions. Hamlet is the exponent of one class of his

speculations: Iago, Edmund, Richard, Macbeth, interpret other parts of his philosophy; while the Duke in 'Measure for Measure,' and the friar in 'Romeo and Juliet,' give expression to thoughts or fancies which would hardly have suited the utterance of speakers so iniquitous and turbulent. Raleigh and Bacon, with many of their contemporaries, looked with a kind of mystical awe on the surface of our planet, in which they rightly judged effects and resources lie concealed which may exercise and perhaps elude the sagacity of man

To the last syllable of recorded time.

Shakespeare's friar is a devout adept in this department of philosophy. We make his acquaintance under pleasant auspices. He is faring forth from his cell, basket in hand, at the earliest break of dawn to cull herbs and flowers while all their virtues were supposed to be enhanced by being steeped in dew:

The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night,
Chequering the eastern clouds with streaks of light,
And flecked darkness like a drunkard reels
From forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheels.

The fresh morning air seems to breathe about us as we read, and the speaker is thenceforward invested with our sympathies for ever; we feel that he is to play an important part in the strange drama, by the influence of which he is absorbed. He talks as if he held himself aloof from secular pursuits and passionate interests, but is immediately swept into the current, and borne along by it irresistibly, till it is swallowed up by death. Meanwhile almost every word he utters is suggestive of strange positions and conclusions, many of them of high import in Shakespeare's philosophy.

Let us listen to his own poetical exegesis of his system, many parts of which challenge objection, though at every step awakening thought :

Now, ere the sun advance his burning eye,
The day to cheer and night's dank dew to dry,
I must up-fill this osier cage of ours
With baleful weeds and precious-juiced flowers.
The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb ;
What is her burying grave that is her womb,
And from her womb children of divers kind
We sucking on her natural bosom find,
Many for many virtues excellent,
None but for some and yet all different.
O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In herbs, plants, stones, and their true qualities :
For nought so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give,
Nor aught so good but strain'd from that fair use
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse :
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied ;
And vice sometimes by action dignified.
Within the infant rind of this small flower
Poison hath residence and medicine power :
For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part ;
Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart.
Two such opposed kings encamp them still
In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will ;
And where the worser is predominant,
Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.

In the early mythology of Hellas the earth, identified with nature and impregnated by the divine intellect, is represented as the mother of all things. Her image in the Ephesian temple was that of a woman with numerous breasts, which suggested to Shakespeare his beautiful description of the universal mother. He understood the mythology, however, in a too restricted sense, since even assuming the earth

to be synonymous with nature, chaos was the womb out of which it sprang, as Milton expresses it :

The womb of Nature
And perhaps her grave.

From this idea has sprung the modern theory of evolution, which owes its reception to the restlessness of the human mind, greedy of novelty, in form if not in substance, and always ready to sacrifice truth to vanity. But if God be essentially a creative being, and by His nature perfect, He must obviously be unchangeable, since the contrary condition of existence implies a being imperfect in itself but perpetually aiming at perfection.¹ Man is never content with his actual state, and reasoning from himself to everything else, he is incapable of conceiving perfect contentment, unchangeableness, and eternal repose. To be weak is to be restless, and craving for that excitement which change gives ; power is concentrated, undisturbed, uniform in action, exactly in proportion to its magnitude, and therefore we can conceive of supreme power as throwing forth from itself whatever exists in the state in which it is to exist for ever. We cannot conceive of the Deity as engaged in making perpetual experiments in order to discover ultimately what in all cases may be best. Shakespeare, however, here,

¹ The author of these Essays evidently did not accept the theories of Darwin with regard to evolution, nor those of Mr. Alfred Wallace on natural selection. It requires a thoroughly scientific mind to appreciate the arguments which trace us back to our true ancestor, the jellyfish. Our pride even makes us hesitate to accept the orang-utangs as our forefathers, though after studying their habits for many years whilst in modified captivity they did appear to us to have something very human about them. It is, on the other hand, more difficult to believe that man appeared on the earth fully equipped, as Pallas from the head of Jove.

as in 'The Tempest,' suggests the doctrine that nature is endued with a mere fleeting phenomenal existence, tending neither to better nor worse, but absolute extinction.

It does not, indeed, necessarily follow that the friar's notions are to be taken for Shakespeare's, which they may or may not be. Still, many of them at least recur so frequently in the plays that they certainly appear to be the natural products of his mind. The things which we find sucking, according to Laurence, the natural bosom of the earth are at the same time supposed to give to the earth some special good: which implies no slight confusion of ideas, since, as everything comes out of the earth, it can obviously give nothing to the earth. Animals, plants, and stones may be indeed employed as so many alembics to inhale and distil certain fluids or juices, which, being infused into barren soil, may render them fertile, or, considered in reference to man, may produce on his frame baneful or beneficial effects.

This double edge discoverable in terrestrial things suggests to the friar a notion analogous to what he finds in his theology. He has picked up a flower, and is gazing on it. His philosophising habit comes upon him; he is perplexed with the dissimilarity of its qualities: it contains poison, and it contains balm; its odour refreshes and invigorates the sense, its taste is death. What then? Are we to stop here? No! He goes on to maintain that, as in herbs, so in man, there exist two hostile principles, which, in the quaint language of the time, he calls grace and rude will, and closes his soliloquy by saying that where the latter is predominant

Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.

Here, then, is the philosophy of 'Romeo and Juliet.' Love, no matter how divine its origin, exists in various forms, and may be allied with various principles, with the sweet, calm, soothing, gentle influence of innocent preference, or with fiery tempestuous passion which sweeps everything before it, and exerts supreme power over the soul or perishes. Some German critics contemplate the love portrayed in 'Romeo and Juliet' as a moral delinquency and justify the catastrophe, instead of calling in the aid of misfortune, or referring to the suggestion that

Time and chance happen to us all.

Philosophy is so calm, sweet, and unassuming that, like a child in its mother's arms, it looks up at nature and the Author of nature with loving trust, believing that all the knowledge which is good for it, it shall have. It does not even desire to obtain everything at once, but, finding its happiness in the process of acquisition, grows as the child grows, larger and stronger imperceptibly. Theology, on the contrary, is harsh and peremptory, and sure to be most positive about what it knows least. Shakespeare is the Plato of modern times, only upon the whole with less obscurity; his thirst for knowledge and his humanity are equal. Out of the womb of his imagination, therefore, he sends forth Juliet and her lover, equally pure and faithful, and though the complications in which they are involved, and which lead them speedily to death, appear sometimes to be of a doubtful character, they leave no soil upon their memories when they finally disappear from us in the monument. This, however, is not the decision of Ulrici, who maintains that Juliet's love betrays her into sin, corruption, and evil,

to which he afterwards adds that Romeo's love is associated by an intrinsic necessity with a hate as vehement, as passionate, and as fatal. It is no doubt true that the bright sphere of love is in this case involved in another and larger sphere of hate, but it is not easy to comprehend how this involution is brought about by intrinsic necessity.

To pursue the topic, however, would be merely to open up again the avenue leading to the abyss of fatalism from which we have only just escaped. Johnson censures the ethical teaching of 'Romeo and Juliet' as at variance with poetical justice, since the lovers have done nothing that ought to have been visited by the fate which overtakes them. But here, on 'this bank and shoal of time,' do not virtue and innocence often become a prey to misfortune, while guilt of the deepest dye pursues till death a triumphant career?

It is because Shakespeare does not pretend to take upon himself the character of a providence, and deal forth awards and punishments according to some delusive ethical theory, that he awakens so profound an interest in our souls by making his great dramatic representations resemble upon the whole what takes place in the world whence Rhadamanthus and Eacus have long been banished, to give sentence elsewhere. Many have persuaded themselves that we find in that other life which here on earth we live in a course running parallel with our ordinary existence the world in which the strict law of justice prevails—I mean the realms of sleep. At the entrance to this world philosophy lays aside her sceptre and delivers us over to another power, which, whether equitable or otherwise, exerts over our souls irresistible authority. What

Virgil was to Dante, Shakespeare is to us, in this boundless abode, alternately dreadful and beautiful, where the wicked suffer punishment, while the innocent and the virtuous are regaled

With a perpetual feast of nectared sweets,
Where no crude surfeit reigns.

No one perhaps is perfectly ingenuous in describing his sleeping experience, partly because the fancy is so lawless a thing that it tramples recklessly on all that our laws and institutions seek to make us reverence. There is nothing moral or immoral in dreams, which possibly represent the original condition of the human race. From the epithets which Homer bestows on sleep we infer that he was a healthy and a good man whom the gods visited nightly, as the celestial Muse did Milton; and if we may draw the same inference from Shakespeare's language, he also enjoyed, whether at Stratford or in London, pleasures analogous to those which refreshed Homer on the shores of Asia Minor:

The innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

Yet, among all the subjects of thought respecting which philosophy has enlightened us, this 'chief nourisher in life's feast' is one of the least explored. Everyone knows how delightful it is, yet it is its very delight that withholds us from understanding it. It comes to us preceded or ushered in by a pageant of physical images which, if the lulling of our senses be suddenly interrupted, it draws up, if I may so speak, like a curtain, which soon begins to descend again

with renewed brilliance. The man whom Charlotte Corday stabbed in a bath has admirably described the series of phenomena by which we lose ourselves in happy dreams; but even his description stops short where we most strongly desire it to proceed. 'Blessed be the man that invented sleep,' exclaims Sancho, 'it wrappeth one about like a garment'; and this garment lost none of its warmth or comfort in the prison of Seville, where it invested in its folds some of the liveliest dreams that ever flashed over the

human imagination.

Superstition has induced mankind to make a fantastical use of dreams, maintaining that they are intended by nature to reveal the future, whereas they only reveal the characters and inclinations of the sleeper. Mercutio, where he sportively describes the offices and trolies of the dream-queen Mab, suggests a world of speculation respecting the sleeping fancies of mankind. We need not agree with him that dreams are nothing, since, as I have suggested, they have a subtle and profound meaning, though, as commonly viewed, they are worse than nothing. It is not his business to deal with sober reflections, but to play with wild phantasms for mere pastime. Romeo has dreamed a dream, and means to relate it, especially as it has suggested to him a reason for not going to the Capulets' banquet; from which the disciples of Artemidorus will infer that Shakespeare is to be reckoned among their number, because had Romeo listened to the prophetic warning he would have eluded the fate that overtook him. Mercutio, however, by his Epicurean banter, brings about his own death and his friend's. Meanwhile he is all mirth and vivacity :

O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes

In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
On the fore-finger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies

Atwart men's noses as they lie asleep :
Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners' legs,
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,

The traces of the smallest spider's web,
The collars of the moonshine's watery beams,
Her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film,

Her wagoner a small grey-coated gnat,
Not half so big as a round little worm
Prick'd from the lazy finger of a maid ;

Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut
Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.

Perhaps no passage in the plays is so likely as this
to have suggested Milton's beautiful line

Sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child.

Everything in this speech is the offspring of fancy
freed from all laws, and gambolling wildly through its
own realm. From this point Mercutio becomes a
satirist, and applies the sting of his wit to one class
of persons after another, playfully, however, and with-
out malice :

In this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love ;
O'er courtiers' knees, that dream on court'sies straight,
O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees,
O'er ladies' lips, who straight on kisses dream,
Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues,
Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are :
Sometimes she gallops o'er a courtier's nose,
And then dreams he of smelling out a suit ;
And sometime comes she with a tittle-pig's tail
Tickling a parson's nose as he lies asleep,

Then dreams he of another benefice :
 Sometime she driveth o'er a soldier's neck,
 And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,
 Of breaches, ambushadoes, Spanish blades,
 Of bealths five-fathom deep ; and then anon
 Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,
 And being thus frighted swears a prayer or two,
 And sleeps again. This is that very Mab
 That plats the manes of horses in the night,
 And bakes the elf-locks in foul sluttish hairs,
 Which once untangled much misfortune bodes :
 This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
 That presses them and learns them first to bear,
 Making them women of good carriage :

This is she——

Rom.

Thou talk'st of nothing.

Mer.

True, I talk of dreams,
 Which are the children of an idle brain,

Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,

Which is as thin of substance as the air

And more inconsistent than the wind, who woos

Even now the frozen bosom of the north,

And, being anger'd, puffs away from thence,

Turning his face to the dew-dropping south.

The office ascribed by Mercutio to Queen Mab may be performed by anyone who has free access to a man or woman in deep sleep. If you pass a bunch of violets or a moss rose, or anything else impregnated with powerful odour, before the face, the sleeper will soon begin to dream of delightful gardens ; and if, after a while, offensive and pungent smells be substituted, dark and hideous dreams will speedily chase away the bright ones. By the same contrivance a succession of ugly or beautiful fancies may be called up before the sleeper's mind, which may sometimes be exalted to rapture or melted to tears before it recovers by waking

its mastery over itself. Yet the success of such an experiment will depend on the age and amount of sensibility possessed by those on whom it is made. Sometimes the consciousness of extreme guilt will give to waking nearly all the characteristics of sleep: the man is no longer master of his own thoughts. He is the passive victim of phantasms and forebodings, dread of he knows not what comes upon him, the objects which surround him are not what he sees, but a chaos of ghastly images which goad and torture him to the verge of madness. Such was the state of Caligula as he ran to and fro and howled at night through the vast arcades and apartments of the imperial palace at Rome, and of Charles the Ninth in Paris after the massacre. Sometimes the half-formed resolution to perpetrate some dreadful thing haunts the brain like the remembrance of crime. Banquo's thoughts on the very night of the murder were busied with some design analogous to that of Macbeth; what it was Shakespeare has not explained, though he clearly suggests its bloody nature.

Groping with his son through the darkness of the castle courts, he says

How goes the night, boy?

File. The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.

Ban. And she goes down at twelve.

File. I take 't, 'tis later, sir.

Ban. Hold, take my sword. There's husbandry in heaven;

Their candles are all out. Take thee that too.

A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,

And yet I would not sleep: merciful powers,

Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature

Gives way to in repose! Give me my sword.

He demands back his weapon because he thinks that the moment for the carrying out of the design

suggested to him in sleep has arrived. His better angel, however, or his reluctance to obey the promptings of nature, prevails as the probable object of his perplexity appears suddenly before him.

Enter Macbeth, and a Servant with a torch.

I have said 'probable' because the subject is left by Shakespeare involved in uncertainty, though we discern clearly that the words of the weird sisters on the blasted heath wrought like venom in the minds of both generals till effaced by death. Banquo's crime mediated, though not perpetrated, was stifled in the womb by the ruthless celerity of Macbeth, who had won the crown, but read in the moody bearing of his partner in ambition that which made him feel on what a giddy and slippery steep he stood. The Brinyes were busy with his slumbers, and even the realities of the waking world failed to blunt their stings.

Lady M. How now, my lord! why do you keep alone,

Of sorriest fancies your companions making,

Using those thoughts which should indeed have died

With them they think on? Things without all remedy

Should be without regard: what's done is done.

Mac. We have scotch'd the snake, not killed it:

She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice

Remains in danger of her former tooth.

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds

suffer,

Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep

In the affliction of these terrible dreams

That shake us nightly: better be with the dead,

Whom we, to gain our place, have sent to peace,

Than on the torture of the mind to lie

In restless egesty.

Could Macbeth, however, when thus arraigned nightly in the court of his own conscience by Nemesis, have

pleaded truly that in all he did he had only yielded obedience to what Ulrici calls 'intrinsic necessity,' he must have silenced the accusing goddess. It was because, in the language of law, he felt conscious that the crime he had perpetrated was his own act and deed that he could put forward nothing to bar judgment, but 'on the torture of the mind to lie in restless ecstasy.' No babbling of weird sisters, no sophistry about jumping the life to come, no satisfaction derived from having placed on his brow the golden round of sovereignty, no brilliant memories of the past, no gratifications springing from the present exercise of power, no soothing influence of hope in the time to come, could scare away from his couch or from his brain those resistless ministers of vengeance that spring to life simultaneously with guilt. The tyrant was now able to appreciate the meed he had earned by his deeds :

I have lived long enough : my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere and yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have ; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

If language could suffice to direct the current of human action, Shakespeare's would ; it is more potent and persuasive than a thousand homilies. He had weighed in the balance all places, positions, and honours, and found them, apart from personal worth, to be mere dross and chaff. It was said by a successful theologian that Shakespeare and the Bible had made him Archbishop of York ; it were better still could students affirm the same influences had made them honest men.

We have already seen that nature effects different purposes through the agency of sleep : sometimes, as in the case of Banquo, stimulating to evil ; more frequently, as in the case of Macbeth, indicting chastisement for evil committed. But in Shakespeare, as in life, both ill-doers and well-doers seek this balm of hurt minds as an asylum where, as in death, the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest. When, however, it is sought with this view by those who are stained with blood, it stands perseveringly aloof and will not be wooed to associate with them till it has been purchased by protracted agony. Henry the Fourth affects to be in doubt why this half-brother of death will not answer his prayers ; whereas it was, in truth, a sceptred shadow whom he, to gain his place had sent to peace, that stood between him and the gate of sleep. When he put, therefore, the ensuing question his conscience muttered the proper answer :

O sleep, O gentle sleep,
 Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,
 That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down
 And steep my senses in forgetfulness ?

Had anyone whispered in his ears the name of Richard the Second, he would have understood the real state of the case. He is not, however, in search of truth, but, with the habitual sophistry of a guilty mind, tries to shift off to the circumstances of his condition what in truth belongs to his own doings. Follow him in the review of those whom sleep visits, and note with what acuteness he points out the difference between them and himself :

Why rather, sleep, best thou in smoky cribs,
 Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,

And hush'd with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,
 Than in the perturbed chambers of the great,
 Under the canopies of costly state,
 And lull'd with sound of sweetest melody ?
 O thou dull god, why liest thou with the vile
 In loathsome beds, and leavest the kingly couch
 A watch-case or a common t'arum-bell ?
 Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
 Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
 In cradle of the rude imperious surge
 And in the visitation of the winds,
 Who take the ruffian billows by the top,
 Curling their monstrous heads and hanging them
 With deafening clamour in the slippery clouds,
 That, with the hurly, death itself awakes ?
 Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose
 To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,
 And in the calmest and most stillest night,
 With all appliances and means to boot,
 Deny it to a king ?

Could Henry have communed with himself in
 language such as this, it might have reconciled him to
 sleeplessness or to anything but the consciousness of
 guilt. But this idea he strives to keep far from him ;
 it is the responsibility of his position that keeps him
 awake :

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

No ! Henry, the fault is not in the crown, but in the
 remembrance of the murder that placed it on your
 head. An innocent king may sleep as well as any
 peasant in his dominions. Titus pillowed his head on
 the blessings of millions, which sent up at the same
 time a sweet-smelling savour to his soul, and made
 his dreams Elysium. Everyone spoke of him as the
 delight of mankind, and when he died there was not
 a dry eye in the empire. If you have bedabbled your

couch with blood, you cannot expect to taste sweet sleep upon it, nor would you be the nearer enjoying it if you stretched your limbs on an uneasy pallet in some smoky crib :

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

CIVILISATION, it is admitted, moves in cycles, and as it touches in its progress certain points of its orbit, similar phenomena present themselves, and are denominated the characteristics of the age. When history comes to deal with us, it will probably enumerate among the most marked features of the period our communistic dreams, and wild agitations about women's rights. Ask Time to turn back his glass, and set us down in the Athenian agora four hundred years before Christ, and we shall find Lysistrata contending victoriously with the statesmen and orators, and Praxagora projecting a division of property and a community of women. Nay, if we take a turn in the Acropolis, we may contemplate the Graces sculptured by a philosopher who put on motley with the same Praxagora, and, like many great female thinkers of the present day, pronounced marriage to be a mistake. But how do we find Shakespeare involved in these discussions? By his practice, if not by his teaching—I mean his practice in the plays. He employs women in important negotiations of State, pits them against kings and princes, and shows how, in the management of public affairs, their subtle and delicate wits often prove more than a match for the cumbersome machinery of the

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ETHNOLOGY

ESSAY XII

masculine brain. In 'Love's Labour's Lost' a French princess is sent by her father, as his diplomatic representative, to negotiate with the King of Navarre affairs of the highest political importance. It is true the poet represents to us the whole in a comic aspect, to suggest perhaps the idea that such is the character which matters of the highest moment would be sure to assume in the hands of women. Love is their world, and they always are or would be queens in it. After a few technical phrases, and barren references to public business, the princess and her ladies betake themselves with unmistakable delight to the established and immemorial policy of their sex, which is to secure to each of them a husband.

But, descending a little in the social scale, Shakespeare, it may be thought, would not attribute to women the skill to distinguish themselves in the more difficult walk of the professions. Instead of this we find that the most advanced Praxagoras of our day may appeal to Shakespeare as an advocate of their wildest claims. No abstruse or intricate problems of law, no recondite mystery in the science of medicine, lies beyond the reach of the female mind. Portia, in learning, acuteness, eloquence of pleading, and affluence of intellectual resources, surpasses all the jurisconsults in the Venetian courts; while in medicine, Helena undertakes a cure which all the physicians in France have declared to be impossible, and her mode of treatment is crowned with success. Well, then, has Shakespeare a mean opinion of women? Not at least in the department of mind, whether as to the ability to acquire knowledge, or in the far more difficult acquisition to know how to use it.

Aristophanes held with respect to women pretty

nearly the same opinions as Shakespeare. He concedes to them all manner of intellectual endowments, but insinuates that, in proportion to the strength of their faculties, they rise above the sphere of morals, and decide as loosely as the worst of their male neighbours on chastity and modesty. Yet it is not a little curious that not one of his women is practically incorrect in her conduct. Like Beatrice, the worst of them contents herself with talking immodestly; and, indeed, it has often been suggested by philosophical writers that the language of women is no key whatever to their ethical principles. Other dramatists of Shakespeare's time lay the scenes of their plays at home, but, excepting 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' and the historical plays, Shakespeare prefers dealing with the warmer women of the South, who are generally believed to be more daring in their amours than our countrywomen. Not that his studies had suggested to him any ethnological system, or that he knew much, except in the most superficial manner, of any nation except our own. It may be surmised that the women he loved, whoever they may have been, had light hair, generally golden, since he attributes this element of beauty to nearly all his heroines, wherever they may be found. Indeed, I remember no female character in the plays of any mark, except Mistress Ford and Rosaline in 'Romeo and Juliet,' who has black hair, and she is remarkable only for her coldness and insipidity. It is doubtless easy in these matters to build up conclusions on too slight a foundation, but it seems to me that Shakespeare associated in his mind moping and melancholy, or at least a tendency to airy speculations, with black hair, which is more consonant with experience than the theory of Goethe. This writer, whose notion is irreconcilable

with the teaching of history as well as with daily experience, maintains that, while dark men are full of vigour and energy, light hair and blue eyes are suggestive of a frail and flaccid constitution. He therefore imagines that Hamlet was fat and fair, since he was a Dane and descended from the Northmen. But were the Northmen, whatever may have been the colour of their eyes or hair, a flaccid and inactive race? Were they not, on the contrary, overboiling with energy, which precipitated them, like a lava torrent, upon the southern nations, and for ages made them the terror of the world?

But, whatever may be our determination on this point, there is no ground in Shakespeare for Goethe's fancy. In the first place, Hamlet is not a youth at all, but a fully developed man thirty years of age, and is only called young to distinguish him from his father, who is the older Hamlet. It does not, of course, necessarily follow that a dark-haired father must have a dark-haired son, but it is more probable than otherwise, and we certainly know that Hamlet's father had black hair. Actors would do well, therefore, to slight the suggestion of Goethe and adhere to dramatic tradition, which, in conformity with the teaching of physiology, makes dark hair the external indication of a meditative and melancholy mind. The most ancient of poets, either through philosophy or instinct, attributes to the fiercest, the bravest, and most energetic of his heroes grey eyes and yellow hair, together with all other elements of surpassing beauty, which it is surprising that Goethe should have forgotten.

I may allude here to another question connected with the idiosyncrasy of races: Does Shakespeare mean that we should take Othello for a negro?

Schlegel and Ulrici reply in the affirmative, apparently because they were unwilling to attribute to the poet what they regard as discreditable ignorance.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the people of England had acquired but a scanty knowledge of geography, and in this science Shakespeare was perhaps rather behind than before his age. He makes Bohemia a maritime country, speaks of Aleppo as a seaport, and might therefore, without much scruple, have peopled in his imagination the southern shore of the Mediterranean with negroes, whom he might easily have confounded with the Moors. At any rate, this is what he does. It is not by any means his intention to bring Othello from the interior of Africa, peopled from time immemorial with servile races as deficient in intelligence as in beauty of form, seldom remarkable for courage, still less for generalship. We must lay no stress, therefore, on thick lips or sooty bosom, and assume Othello to be what he is called, Moor, instinct with the fiery valour and deep-rooted passions of the Arab race, easily betrayed where their preferences were concerned into the excesses of jealousy and rage.

In Christian realms attention was bestowed on the Hebrew people, partly because of the connexion of their history with that of the prevalent religion, but chiefly because of their universal presence throughout Christendom. Yet it was the attention of hatred to the thing hated. Familiarity produced no kindly feelings, no proclivity towards pleasant intercourse, no mutual respect or even tolerance; but, instead, practice of persecution on one side, and the feeling of deadly hatred and revenge on the other. It is sometimes suggested that Shakespeare in 'The Merchant of Venice' endeavours, in conformity with the natural

humanity of his disposition, to mitigate this state of things. But I think otherwise. Here and there in the play some touches of pity are experienced for the bated miser whose confidence in the wise laws of the State abates in no degree his hostility to all around him ; but that the poet has no wish to soften the reciprocal animosity which Hebrew and Christian cherish towards each other is all along evident, and rendered indisputable by the catastrophe. I have said that Shakespeare loves everything in the creation, but I must make one exception—he does not like a Jew ; and if a majority of mankind, whether Mohammedans, Pagans, or Christians, were in their secret conscience to put the question to themselves, they would probably find their feelings more akin to those of Shakespeare than they might think it philosophical to acknowledge. An explanation of this fact is often supposed to be discoverable in the history of the last eighteen hundred years, which represents the ancient race clutching desperately at their dying religion, while the younger nations, in the midst of whom they live, despise their creed and smile at their tenacity. But we must look deeper if we would solve the problem. The Japhetic mind differs so essentially from the Semitic that it seems almost impossible to transplant the characteristic ideas of the one into the other. Seated beside a Western Asiatic on some moonlit crag or sandhill in the desert, you may soon convince yourself of this if you touch on the fundamental beliefs of humanity. His ideas of God will immediately appear to be different from your ideas ; he may denominate Him ‘the compassionate, the merciful,’ but he understands by these terms the compassion and mercy of a despot, who will have mercy on those on whom He will have mercy, while

those whom He will, He hardeneth. No arguments will in all likelihood convince your companion that we ought to believe, with the Greek poet, that we are all His offspring, and that His care and goodness extend to all alike; the Semitic man will contend that the Deity exhibits favouritism in His dealings with mankind, that He chooses this or that people on whom in preference to shower His blessings, to endue with the faculty to comprehend His nature, and to be the exponents of truth to the rest of mankind.

Shakespeare brings Shylock before us so palpably enveloped with Hebrew associations and traditions that we almost fancy we behold the Old Testament on the stage: Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Laban, and their progeny, emerge from between the sand mounds and palm trees, and seem to be engaged in their primitive avocations before us. But are their sympathies ours? Are their feelings ours? Shylock speedily supplies us with an answer. Shakespeare heaps up in this man all the hateful qualities which, in the opinion of his contemporaries, characterised the Jew, and the whole tendency of the play is to expose him to derision and dislike. ; Christian audiences, whether Catholic or Protestant, would have been displeased had the case been otherwise; but this is not the reason of the poet's proceedings. He is evidently dealing with his own feelings and prejudices, and brings to bear all the resources of language and all the venom of poetry against the unhappy Jew. To defraud him of his money, his only safeguard against oppression, is not enough; he is a father, and, like David's victim, he has but one little ewe lamb, that he cherishes in his bosom. By the merciless dramatist this, the only object of his affections, is torn from him, not by

external violence, which would have been more tolerable, but by her own heartless wantonness. While he is writhing under this wound, which gives tenfold sharpness to his revenge, the hope of gratifying which is now the only pleasure left him, the lady of Belmont, travestied into a lawyer, annihilates his last hope in life, and exhibits him to himself and the world as a hopeless and forlorn hypocrite.

Among the many lapses in Shakespeare's philosophy this is perhaps the most remarkable, since it is at variance with the general spirit of his teaching, as well as with his personal character. He is not here, what he is sometimes fondly called, the poet of all time, but a man of the seventeenth, or rather of the sixteenth, century, swayed by one of its worst prejudices—employing his art, not in the interest of humanity, but in that of ruthless oppression.

In one respect Shakespeare's teaching differs essentially from that which finds favour with many sophists of the present day: he does not believe that one thing can be transmuted into another, or that any influence will suffice to impregnate certain natures with wisdom or goodness. The mould and the material being such or such, the result will inevitably correspond with the sources in which it originates. There are natures teachable and natures unteachable. Whatever the product of natural forces is, that it must essentially remain for ever, any variation in form or aspect notwithstanding. No art known to man could transform Iago into Romeo, Edmund into Hamlet, or Lady Macbeth into Ophelia. The types of being are unchangeable, so that the utmost that can be done is to conceal by education the nature of the internal forces and to guard throughout life against those occasions

which, when they are evil, might make them blossom into action. Fancy and imagination have always played a great part in philosophy, but I know of no instance in which they have gone so far as in the doctrine of sexual selection, which teaches that the fancy of the peahen has produced the peacock's tail. It is no doubt probable that in great length of time, as an old Greek poet remarks, very improbable things should happen; but it demands an amount of faith scarcely reconcilable with reason to believe that length of time has changed a jellyfish into the Venus de' Medici or the Belvedere Apollo. Shakespeare certainly had no inkling of such a theory. He has presented us with the spawn of a devil and a witch, and shown the impracticability of implanting goodness in it:

Enter CALIBAN.

Cal. As wicked dew as e'er my mother brush'd
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen
Drop on you both! a south-west blow on ye
And blister you all o'er.

Pros. For this, be surs, to-night thou shalt have cramps,
Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins
Shall, for that vast of night that they may work,
All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinch'd
As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging
Than bees that made 'em.

Cal. I must eat my dinner.
This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!

avowed, that might makes right, and that we owe no justice to the weak or wicked? Prospero was the prototype of modern colonising nations, who, when they land in new countries, first enslave and then annihilate the aborigines. Where are the natives of Van Diemen's Land? Where are the Caribs? And where in a short time will be the entire race of Red Men? In those happy hunting grounds

Where slaves once more their native land behold,
No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold.

Audiences almost always, and readers generally, give their sympathy to Prospero and abhor Caliban, not only because he is ugly and uncouth, but because he is weak and driven by that weakness to employ the only means left him for recovering his liberty. He may be taken to represent the enslaved races in despotisms, trampled upon and thrust down into the mire, made to toil without hope, to be punished for their inferiority with stripes, to be denounced as grovelling, brutish, wicked, and, when they are thus driven to have recourse to violence, fiercely scourged into submission. By the law of nature the island was Caliban's, he was the original possessor and proprietor, and, as he himself expresses it, was his own king; Prospero was an intruder upon his domains, and had no right but that of the stronger. What was Caliban's ignorance to him? If he gabbled, it was in his own territories, the extent and qualities of which he understood and foolishly taught the invader. 'Cursed be I that did so,' he exclaims. His fondness for Miranda was a natural instinct. He knew nothing of the uncomeliness of his person, but in his quality of king of the isle thought himself good enough to possess any

female ; he was certainly far in advance of Darwin's ape, since, though new to Italian, he could make use of his own dialect, which the insolent stranger called gabbling.

Hunter has already pointed out the fact that Shakespeare was indebted for the original conception of 'The Tempest' to Ariosto ; but Caliban is the creation of his own genius, even though he may have had Middleton's 'Firestone' in his mind's eye.

In no part of his writings does Shakespeare throw aside so completely his allegiance to nature as in the play of 'Cymbeline.' By so doing he likewise falls into contradiction with himself, not only if we take into consideration the entire body of his writings, but in the selfsame play. The king, father to Imogen and her brothers, is throughout exhibited to us as a mean, weak, poor-spirited person, subjected through his sensuality to a flagitious woman, ready to sacrifice at her behest his daughter's person and reputation to a licentious fool, and in all respects a slave to irrational passion. Yet when Belarius comes to pronounce the eulogium of his two nurslings, Guiderius and Arviragus, he reasons after the following fashion :

O thou goddess,
Thou divine Nature, how thyself thou blazon'st
In these two princely boys ! They are as gentle
As zephyrs blowing below the violet,
Not wagging his sweet head ; and yet as rough,
Their royal blood enchafed, as the rudest wind,
That by the top doth take the mountain pine,
And make him stoop to the vale. 'Tis wonder
That an invisible instinct should frame them
To royalty unlearn'd, honour untaught,
Civility not seen from other, valour
That wildly grows in them, but yields a crop
As if it had been sow'd.

Shakespeare forgets that the speaker who delivers this rhapsody is himself, according to the teaching of the whole play, a nobleman endowed with great virtue, distinguished by the refinement of his manners, who consequently need not wonder that they who have been brought up with his example always before them, familiar with his courtly language, inspired by his lofty sentiments, and sedulously withheld from everything base and mean, should when occasion calls display some proofs of their education. He wonders, however, without much cause. The first of virtues, whether in prince or peasant, is reverence to parents, the absence of which excites his doting eloquence ; the instinct, too, which is the cause of so much surprise to Belarius, is blinder than that of Caliban, since even with the aid of Imogen's feminine beauty it fails to discern the sex of their new idol. Thus, however, they express their instinct :

Gui. I love thee ; I have spoke it :
How much the quantity, the weight as much,
As I do love my father.

Bel. What ! how ! how !
Arv. If it be sin to say so, sir, I yoke me
In my good brother's fault : I know not why
I love this youth ; and I have heard you say,
Love's reason's without reason : the bier at door,
And a demand who is't shall die, I'd say
' My father, not this youth.'

Instead of the disgust which sentiments so unnatural ought to beget, Belarius feels nothing but admiration : ' O noble strain ! O breed of greatness ! ' he exclaims, in a fit of loyalty worthy of Beaumont and Fletcher. Afterwards instinct breaks down when the youths are brought into the presence of their real father,

and the mole, a sanguine star, is alone relied upon to establish their identity.

The fancy about instinct breaks forth once more in 'As You Like It,' where it is again interwoven with the hereditary transmission of knowledge and polished manners. Orlando, in spite of the gross rusticity in which he has been brought up, feels by instinct the nobility of his birth, and his caitiff brother Oliver, who meditates his taking off, thus sets forth his qualifications :

He's gentle, never schooled and yet learned, full of noble device, of all sorts enchantingly beloved, and indeed so much in the heart of the world, and especially of my own people, who best know him, that I am altogether misprised.

In the development of this story Shakespeare abandons his theory of instinct, and regard for probability along with it, for Rosalind, by the aid of a little male attire, so completely defeats the observation and common sense of her lover that he toys with her, kisses and embraces her, not once but habitually day by day for weeks, not only without suspecting her identity, but without even suspecting her sex. Phoebe, too, mistakes this slender girl for a man, just as Olivia does Viola. Julia, in 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona,' manages by the help of a suit of clothes to deceive the princess Silvia, together with her own lover Proteus.

The Greek dramatists had formed a much truer theory of the nature of instinct. The strongest of all the ties of blood, that which unites mother and son, is not discovered by *Cædipus* or *Jocasta*, who become husband and wife, live together, and have many children, without the least interference from instinct. It is through knowledge derived from an external source that their relationship is made apparent. When

the terrible truth breaks upon them, the force of what we call instinct exerts itself, but at the same time reveals the truth that it is not nature but custom that directs the currents of human thought, as well on this as on every other subject. No mind acts and thinks independently, but is swayed by antecedent thought, which invests itself with the sacred character of nature, and its voice when it speaks is constantly mistaken for the voice of God. Shakespeare suffered his ideas to be bewildered for awhile by the subtle intricacies of this question, but at length escaped from them and co-ordinated his speculations more in harmony with truth.

ESSAY XIII

PHILOSOPHY : COUNTRY LIFE—OLD AGE—DISTRIBUTION
OF HAPPINESS

IN physical philosophy Shakespeare might perhaps have held a high place had he chosen to withdraw his observation from the moving and living world to fix it on unsentient nature. But his mission was to deal with man, his actions, his passions, and that ocean of thought through which he has to make his way towards the objects of his aim in life. He seems, like the great sophist of antiquity, to have represented to himself man as the measure of all things, which, whatever may be urged to the contrary, he is to himself, since everything lying beyond the range of his thought and experience has no existence for him.

Our relations to the outward world—that is, to all things external to ourselves—are so completely involved in mystery as to have led in some minds to the belief that they have no real being, but exist exclusively in the sphere of our ideas. This notion, however, was altogether foreign to Shakespeare, though, as I have already observed, he contrived to unite with belief in the ultimate evanescence of matter the persuasion that whatever we feel and see is real. Hence the singular charm of his poetry. The agents about us are all flesh and blood, the scene on which they live and move is substantial, solid, unequivocal matter ; as you hear and

see them, so you perceive distinctly the theatre in which they act and suffer.

Many look upon Shakespeare as a lively, jovial Epicurean who, though he could occasionally close his eyes upon the sunshine and cultivate a familiarity with the night side of nature, held generally with Democritus that the world is rather a comedy than a tragedy, a thing to be laughed at, not mourned over. This view, however, is scarcely borne out by experience. The more familiar you become with his thoughts, the stronger will be your conviction that the life he lived had not proved satisfactory to himself, and that although he purchased houses and lands at Stratford, and rose from the rank of yeoman to that of gentleman, he still felt himself altogether out of place in the social system then existing in England. Among the considerations which should reconcile a man of humble rank to death is that he need

Fear no more the frown of the great,

which, with slander and rash censure, he classes with 'the lightning's flash and the all-dreaded thunder-stone.' The aim of his moral philosophy is to blunt the edge of disappointment, to show us where the sources of anguish and sorrow lie, and where, if we will take counsel of him, we may escape some at least of the sharp evils that wound us in the world :

Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court ?
Here feel we but the penalty of Adam,
The seasons' difference, as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind.

He has elsewhere shown what delight is to be extracted from action, from the emulation of soul with

soul, from the struggles of ambition, guiltless or guilty, from the worship of beauty, from the enjoyment of fame; but in the 'life removed' there is, he insists, a greater sweetness, a more luxurious calm, something more analogous to the deepest and most recondite recesses of our being :

This our life exempt from public haunt
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in every thing.

There is pleasure while it lasts in gambling, brawling, intriguing, fighting, which both Raleigh and Southampton would have acknowledged, though on one occasion the gratification may have cost the latter half his beard. Faulconbridge derived pleasure from goading his father's enemy with insults, Constance derived enjoyment from taunting Elinor with the vices of her offspring, while Richard experienced excess of glee as he pushed one of his relatives after another from the stage of life.

But if with the dethroned Duke you stroll leisurely through the Forest of Arden, enjoying the commingled odours of the fresh grass, the mosses, the wild flowers, the falling leaves as they are shaken down by chance, and listen while the nightingale, 'in shadiest covert hid,' pours forth her rapturous notes, you would scarcely envy those who, under canopies of costly state, enjoy the tattle of fashionable society :

World, world, O world !
But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
Life would not yield to age.

It is age, however, and age warped and soured by the direst afflictions, that judges thus of life. It is not the thing contemplated, but the thing contemplating,

that is subject to those strange mutations which made Lear, in the sickness of his heart, hate the world. The same individual in health and prosperity might have sat at dawn among sand-hills on the sedgy shore and gazed with inexpressible delight on the very type and embodiment of mutation as beneath the creeping light it throws its waves hither and thither in splash and foam.

In England always, and in Shakespeare's time especially, there has been and is a certain amount of irreverence felt for old age, because it is weak, dependent, used up, incapable of giving or receiving pleasure, suspended, as it were, against the wall of life,

Like rusty arms in monumental mockery.

It was not thus in Hellas, especially in the greater states, nor is it thus among the Arabs, where a sheikh with wrinkled forehead and beard of snow is regarded with as much love and awe by his tribe as a sceptred king.

'The heavens themselves are old,' exclaims Lear, writhing under the consciousness, not merely that he is old, but that he wants the wisdom which should accompany age. When Shakespeare desires to make youth, with little else to recommend it, enter at once within the sphere of our sympathies, he sets it before us showing respect for old age. Oliver, invested in nearly all the qualities calculated to inspire disgust, crowns them all by speaking thus ; having dismissed his younger brother, he says to Adam :

Get you with him, you old dog.

Adam. Is 'old dog' my reward? Most true, I have lost my teeth in your service. God be with my old master! he would not have spoke such a word.

When Adam has joined Orlando in his pilgrimage to the forest and is faint for want of sustenance, he says :

Dear master, I can go no further : O, I die for food ! Here lie I down, and measure out my grave. Farewell, kind master.

To which Orlando replies :

Why, how now, Adam ! no greater heart in thee ? Live a little ; comfort a little ; cheer thyself a little. If this uncouth forest yield any thing savage, I will either be food for it or bring it for food to thee. Thy conceit is nearer death than thy powers. For my sake be comfortable ; hold death awhile at the arm's end : I will here be with thee presently ; and if I bring thee not something to eat, I will give thee leave to die : but if thou diest before I come, thou art a mocker of my labour. Well said ! thou lookest cheerly, and I'll be with thee quickly. Yet thou liest in the bleak air : come, I will bear thee to some shelter ; and thou shalt not die for lack of a dinner, if there live any thing in this desert. Cheerly, good Adam !

We are immediately convinced that he who can speak thus is wanting in the rudiments of no virtue, and we love him because he loves his servant, bears him out of the bleak wind like a child, and would rather die than fail in the performance of his sweet duty. Romeo has few occasions to give proof of this virtue of noble minds, but we infer from his intercourse with the friar that no beauty of reverence lies beyond his reach. Not so with Hamlet ; though loving the daughter with such love as he has to give, he treats the father with an irreverence bordering upon scorn, not merely, indeed, because he is old, but, basing a large portion of his contempt on that fact, he adds to the sum of it all that foolishness in age inspires. Ophelia, on the other hand, from the most hidden depth of her affection loves the old man with a love which, supplemented by strength, might have

transformed her under suitable circumstances into an Antigone. No one, perhaps, has ever admired Claudio in 'Much Ado about Nothing'; but even the poor figure he makes as a lover, the readiness with which he gives credit to the supposed baseness of Hero, the needless cruelty with which he treats her, and the heartless mode in which this cruelty is exhibited, hardly shock us so much as the brutal levity with which he treats and speaks of her aged father. Meeting Benedick, as he and Pedro have just parted from Leonato and his brother, he observes sarcastically:

We had like to have had our two noses snapped off with two old men without teeth.

Does this grossness pass for wit, and excite a laugh upon the stage?

I have observed elsewhere that goodness nowhere provokes ridicule in Shakespeare, but is environed always with a circle of respect or love, which awakens corresponding feelings in the reader or hearer. To give, it is said, is more blessed than to receive; but, however noble this act may be, Shakespeare has shown in 'Timon' that giving is not generosity, and that unless regulated by wisdom it is more likely to prove a curse than a blessing. It is obviously the poet's intention to suggest that whatever a man does he should at least aim by his actions at doing good. If the object of your generosity is good already, you must sedulously guard against rendering him bad by your proceedings, for an overweight of benefits is apt to beget ingratitude by rendering the feeling of gratitude painful through its constant presence in the mind. It necessarily implies inferiority of one kind or other, and if the obliged person is neither able nor has any hope to make some adequate return,

the consciousness of weakness is generated, and this consciousness often leads the mind to confound obligations with injuries. By this process a good disposition may be tainted with evil. On the other side, if generosity be blind it ends by corrupting the giver, since when he perceives that, instead of kindling affection or gratitude in those to whom he has been lavish of his bounty, he has only engendered thanklessness, his heart becomes steeled against compassion, and for the love of mankind he substitutes hatred. This is the philosophy of 'Timon,' which, occupying a middle space between tragedy and comedy, escapes being either, and can merely be regarded as a satire. The only class of men who come out unscathed from the fiery furnace of profusion are the servants of the wild spendthrift, who, profiting in their degree by his wastefulness and freed by their position from the duty of making a return in kind, have their hearts softened by the benefits they have received, and cling with noble fidelity to the man whom all other classes desert.

If we merely regard what may be called the surface teaching of the world, we may often be betrayed into impiety by imagining we discover partiality or flat injustice in the distribution of happiness among men. But who can say what happiness is, or decide who possesses it and who does not? The discrowned philosopher in 'As You Like It,' who makes a virtue of necessity, and tries to persuade himself that he is content with his lot, exclaims, on witnessing the suffering of Adam and Orlando,

Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy :
This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in.

The display of Stoicism he had previously made, then, was no better than a sham: he was still secretly longing for his dukedom, and insinuating that place is to be taken for something in the estimate we are to make of happiness. Our Duke's philosophy was *dehors les dents*, as our neighbours express it; in his heart there was another system of feelings and opinions. Shakespeare had considered the story of Charles the Fifth, of which he has made more uses than one; and his teaching is, that the ruler who abdicates is bound to make sure of two things before he takes that step—first, that he makes way for a better man than himself; second, that he is not about to condemn himself to lifelong regret or remorse. No truth is more obvious than that men move most easily in the groove with which they have been made familiar by custom. Compelled by necessity to share with rustics and inferior animals the sustenance and shelter which the forest could afford, the Duke puts the best face he can on his exile, compares life in the envious Court with life in the woods, to the disparagement of the former, and exclaims with a sort of enthusiasm,

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.

But when circumstances lead him to a reconsideration of his statement, the original form into which his thoughts and feelings had been thrown by place and education presents itself, and he vaults back to it at a bound. Addressing the whole body of his followers, he says:

Every of this happy number
That have endured shrewd days and nights with us
Shall share the good of our returned fortune,
According to the measure of their states.

The turnings and shiftings of events in the drama have necessarily been suggested by what takes place in life :

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players :
They have their exits and their entrances.

But these exits, have they not filled mankind with fear and wonder since the beginning of time? When placed by we know not what power on this mysterious stage, must we through whole wildernesses of calamity continue to tread it still, or may we, if so minded, make our own exit? Some incidents in the life of Raleigh suggest the probability that he had discussed with Shakespeare the subject of suicide, and that the poet has put into the mouth of Hamlet his answer to Raleigh's sceptical conclusions; for this great man held suicide to be lawful, though, like his unhappy Queen, for unexpressed reasons he abstained from putting the theory in practice.

Whatever may have been his doubts, Raleigh had not extirpated from his mind the belief in immortality, neither had Shakespeare, though his speculations were involved in quite as much uncertainty as Raleigh's. In the fervour of his reasoning upon life and death, in his agonising regret that the Everlasting had fixed His canon against self-slaughter, the Danish prince involves his reasoning powers in the inextricable meshes of scepticism, and regarding the world itself as a huge cage, beats the wings of his spirit against it in the vain attempt to flee away and be at rest :

To die : to sleep ;
To sleep : perchance to dream : ay, there's the rub ;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause : there's the respect

That makes calamity of so long life ;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin ? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of ?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all ;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

In this passage, so rich in thought, so prolific of reflection, the philosophy may be right ; but, if so, it exposes a flaw in Shakespeare's art, which if he perceived he would not remove. Here he affirms, what all thinking men will affirm with him, that from the dreary regions of death, which he truly describes as undiscovered, no traveller returns ; and yet the very foundation of the play in which this truth is uttered rests upon the supposed return of a traveller from that undiscovered country : so perilous is the attempt to reconcile superstition and philosophy.

Some portion, if not a large portion, of Shakespeare's mind was made up out of materials borrowed from Christianity, where the canon against self-slaughter is found by inference, though not by express declaration. In reality, however, suicide is forbidden by the laws of nature, though the Romans, a pre-eminently

religious people, contrived to elude the force of primitive instincts, and to reconcile the practice of self-destruction with piety. One of the cardinal incidents in their early history is the suicide of Lucretia, whose soul, set free by the dagger, Shakespeare describes as mounting directly to Heaven :

She sheathed in her harmless breast
A harmful knife, that thence her soul unsheathed :
That blow did bail it from the deep unrest
Of that polluted prison where it breathed :
Her contrite sighs unto the clouds bequeath'd
Her winged sprite, and through her wounds doth fly
Life's lasting date from cancell'd destiny.

From that time downwards, till 'the noblest Roman of them all' breathed forth his soul on the field of Philippi, frequent suicides characterised the story of the masters of the world. In Shakespeare's plays, the Roman mode of unsheathing the soul is of frequent occurrence ; good and bad, noble and ignoble, from Juliet and Portia to Goneril, seek death by their own hands.

ESSAY XIV

SHAKESPEARE'S EMPLOYMENT OF THE SUPERNATURAL

IN the oldest religions of mankind, which grew up out of a very limited study of nature, we find, in the midst of piety, beliefs scarcely reconcilable with it. In their search into the origin of things, they discovered forces in operation, which, according to the point of view whence they were regarded, suggested ideas of good or evil. In these forces they thought they discerned intelligence, and an aptitude to enter into relations with human beings through the performance by the latter of certain ceremonies and rites which exerted a mystic efficacy. In their conception this globe of earth, of which they knew not the extent, was synonymous with Nature: the source of all being, whether human or divine, throwing forth continually, from her prolific womb, existences of all kinds instinct with spirit or intelligence. Human beings, according to this theory, are only so many external embodiments of internal forces, which, in proportion to those forces or to their nature, are linked and hold communion with the spiritual root from which they spring.

This idea was firmly fixed in the Hellenic mind, and has probably held possession more or less of all minds from the very beginning of things. To extirpate it, therefore, is impossible. Throughout all latitudes it springs up, as it were, under the feet of humanity,

and, diffusing itself like an atmosphere, involves everything that lives and reasons in its folds. The difference between the wisest and the least wise is only one of degree, the constitution of all minds being essentially the same. Hence, at different periods of the world's history, the rapid spread of epidemic beliefs, which, through some inextricable affinity, pass from mind to mind, till whole quarters of the world are overshadowed by some new form of superstition; just as, beneath the surface of the earth, there runs round the globe a belt of earthquakes, always more or less in activity, but sometimes so violent as to make us distrust the stability of what we stand on.

Events taking place among men were, in conformity with the above theory, traced to springs lying outside of the human mind, but darting their influence into it in obedience to hidden laws of which it were vain to seek the nature.

The Greek dramatists subordinated the action of all their pieces to an influence originating beyond the sphere of humanity, but invested with that grandeur and majesty which in human apprehension belong to the unknown.

The Northern nations, deriving their religion from the East, drew likewise from the same source that superstition, which after the introduction of Christianity they shaped into the belief in witchcraft. It would be wronging Shakespeare to suspect him of sharing in such a belief, but perceiving how widely it prevailed, and in what revered department of superstition it took its rise, he resolved to employ it for dramatic purposes. In his mind, the process appears to have been this: a council of intelligences, in their nature evil, being held, it is in it determined to

originate a series of disastrous events in the kingdom of Scotland. The plan of action is laid down, the instruments are chosen, the delusions are conceived and organised by which the calamitous process is to be completed. All this having been antecedently settled, Shakespeare's genius, accepting the decision of destiny, brings together the agents natural and supernatural, and begins his drama.

Every reader perceives that Macbeth is accosted by the witches on the 'blasted heath,' in conformity with a scheme of action laid down elsewhere, without his privity or the consent of his will. I say nothing now of the ethical question, but look upon things simply as they are found in Shakespeare, though not without reference to something not found in him, but yet necessary to the completeness and comprehension of what is there found. It might be mere pedantry to attribute to the poet the design of lecturing mankind on the absurdity of their superstitions; we may suppose him intent only on producing a work of art, in which sublime conceptions, and terrible displays of guilt, overshadow a sense of hideous meanness and deformity. If he could not look into the seeds of time, he could certainly discern distinctly the nature of the ideas prevalent among his contemporaries, more particularly in the brain of the sovereign whom the English people had elected to succeed their great queen.

When the supernatural is brought into collision with the natural, it does not follow that the latter must yield to the shock; the human mind though weak, if compared with the united forces of the invisible world, is not constrained of necessity to succumb to them, although the danger of such a result may be

imminent. The conflict is now about to take place; the powers of evil are represented by three bearded women, right and justice by two soldiers in the plenitude of manhood, but intoxicated with ambition by success. The witches behold their prey, and the art of Shakespeare begins at once to give evidence of its potency. On perceiving the strange objects before them, Banquo exclaims :

What are these
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants of the earth,
And yet are on't ? Live you ? or are you aught
That man may question ? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her chappy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips : you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

In order to take a firm hold on the mind of Macbeth, the witches dazzle him with a sample of their prophetic skill ; whence this knowledge of the future came to them is another question, but they possessed it, and, like the seers of old, subdued the existing by the unborn :

Mac. Speak, if you can : what are you ?
First Witch. All hail, Macbeth ! hail to thee, thane of Glamis !
Second Witch. All hail, Macbeth ! hail to thee, thane of Cawdor !
Third Witch. All hail, Macbeth ! thou shalt be king hereafter.

In some old book of emblems the idea of Destiny is suggested by part of a chain, composed of bright and huge links, which issues from a black cloud, and after throwing a long sweep towards the earth, rises at the other end to the same cloud and is lost in it again. Within the embrace of this chain, Macbeth now chose to place himself, so that henceforward he can

hardly be regarded as a voluntary agent. Once indeed, at a future point in his career, it seems as if he might have slipped out of its grasp; but here at least he yields up, unresistingly, his whole soul to the fascination of a sceptre, and while he is under the influence of his waking dream, Banquo extorts from the weird sisters what they have to say of his fortunes :

Ban. I' the name of truth,
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show ? My noble partner
You greet with present grace and great prediction
Of noble having and of royal hope,
That he seems rapt withal : to me you speak not.
If you can look into the seeds of time
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favours nor your hate.

First Witch. Hail !

Second Witch. Hail !

Third Witch. Hail !

First Witch. Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

Second Witch. Not so happy, yet much happier.

Third Witch. Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none :
So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo !

First Witch. Banquo and Macbeth, all hail !

Mac. Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more :
By Sinel's death I know I amthane of Glamis ;
But how of Cawdor ? thethane of Cawdor lives,
A prosperous gentleman ; and to be king
Stands not within the prospect of belief,
No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence
You owe this strange intelligence ? or why
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
With such prophetic greeting ? Speak, I charge
you. [Witches vanish.

Ban. The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them. Whither are they vanish'd ?

Mac. Into the air ; and what seem'd corporal melted
As breath into the wind. Would they had stay'd !

Ban. Were such things here as we do speak about ?
Or have we eaten on the insane root,
That takes the reason prisoner ?

If intelligence be a necessary part of human nature, the passions which inhere in it, and the ideas and beliefs which it grasps, form also part of it, and must obviously be co-lasting with it. When congregated together in huge cities, men appear to have passed out of the domain of Nature, and, living in close proximity to each other, may almost be said to think in masses, and in this state encourage each other in the notion that they are stronger than their forefathers were of old, and can dispense with those secret helps to the understanding which communion with Nature in solitary places, in caves, in the recesses of mountains, or on the wild beach seemed to engender. Hence faith in several things, formerly believed in, appears to die out ; but only appears, since a sudden change of circumstances, war, pestilence, eclipses, earthquakes, allying themselves with the shadow of death, bring back into most souls the beliefs of primitive humanity ; and these beliefs united and formed into a system have subdued and kept in subjection the intelligence of the whole world, assuming different names in different ages, but in their essence and real character remaining always the same.

If we push back our researches to the farthest horizon, as it were, of thought, we shall perceive through the dimmest twilight figures of magicians, necromancers, enchanters, the seers of visions, the dreamers of dreams, who, through various processes, engaged to unveil the future, and reveal to their contemporaries the events that should come after them. In some parts of the East these pretensions

were regarded as so nearly bordering on criminality as, in certain contingencies, to be punishable with death. In old Hellas thought vindicated to itself a freer range, and there accordingly the offspring of superstition acquired its natural development. Man could not pretend to have the surface of the earth all to himself; beings of less tangible forms, but still material, and at times visible, inhabited this world with him, sometimes emerging from the infernal regions, from the seas, from rivers, or fountains, or trees, or even, apparently, from the air itself. All these beings had their duties and appointed places in the realm of Nature, and were employed to direct, stimulate, enlighten, or sometimes to terrify, chastise, or punish human beings for their misdeeds.

In all this vast system of existences we discover nothing exactly analogous to a witch. Alastor, Lamia, Empusa, the Destinies, the Erinnyes had all more or less reference to the chastisement of guilt, and had never, at least in remoter ages, the least power to injure the innocent. It was only after that period in the world's history, in which superstition invented the devil, that a witch became possible, though for several ages after, indeed almost up to our own day, multitudes of harmless women, more especially if poor and old, were burnt alive or otherwise destroyed to gratify the malignant stupidity of their fellow-creatures.

Ignorant persons formerly imagined they discovered traces of witchcraft in the Hebrew scriptures; but though we find there reference to superstitions analogous to those of other countries, we discover not one word indicating a belief in witchcraft.

The Greek tragedians brought supernatural beings on the stage, but under different conditions from those

in which Shakespeare's witches present themselves. The Furies in *Æschylus* are females—old, hideous, repulsive—yet with an inherent sublimity, not merely because they are supposed to be instinct with deity, but because the mission assigned to them by fate is to punish the most awful aberrations from the laws of justice. Though terrible, therefore, in their nature, and no less terrible in their appearance, they irresistibly command reverence by the sacred duty with which they are invested. They first appear to the spectator asleep on benches in the dim interior of the great temple at Delphi, while Orestes, the victim they are commanded to pursue, clasps, in the habit of a suppliant, the image of the god—a situation from which he could not be dragged without impiety. To the Greek mind contemporary with *Æschylus*, the Fury suggested ideas and associations so deeply inwrought with terror and dread that audiences experienced some difficulty in resisting the effects of the representation. The powers then supreme in heaven were believed to owe their supremacy to usurpation, while the gods from whom they had wrested power were driven from the realms of light down to that nether world where the spirits of men after death were supposed to dwell for ever in various states of happiness or pain.

The exhibition on the stage of these subterranean goddesses, clothed with right and justice and commissioned to punish blood-guiltiness, necessarily inspired feelings far more powerful than the appearance of a few witches grotesque in their aspect, and associated in the imagination with loathsome rites and murderous purposes. Shakespeare has, nevertheless, contrived to connect them in the tragedy of

'Macbeth' with a strange interest, prevented from becoming absorbing by their ludicrous incantations, their obscene fancies, and grotesque wickedness.

Whatever men believe, exists in their imagination, and in that sense, therefore, ghosts are real beings, in whatever way the idea of them originated. In fact, wherever there are men there are ghosts, though the mode in which they associate themselves with the living depends on numerous variations in the forms of thought prevalent in different countries and stages of civilisation. Shakespeare as a poet beheld everything subjected to his genius, whether in the inner or in the outer world, to be made use of in his artistic creations according to the suggestions of his fancy or the decisions of his will. But the supernatural, wherever and by whomsoever employed, is difficult to be dealt with, because we are unacquainted with the laws which regulate its existence if it exists, though we may and ought to know the nature of the laws which govern it if it be the offspring of our own invention. Yet no amount of intellect seems adequate to impart, to that which is created by fancy, the consistency which is the attribute of natural existences.

The ghost of Darius in *Æschylus*, when forced by magic to ascend from the nether world, falls into inconsistencies which we should scarcely have expected to find in the production of so great an intellect. No nation has yet fabricated a settled and consistent system of belief respecting the condition of departed spirits, or the amount of their power and knowledge. *Æschylus's* judgment was at fault on this subject. The ghost of Darius when it emerges to light is ignorant of the events which had taken place on

earth since its descent into Hades, but its atmosphere soon clears, and it then not only recollects the past but looks unerringly into the future. The account of a still older apparition is more distinct and vivid. When the enchantress of Endor calls up the manes of Samuel, the Hebrew king inquires in extreme terror what she beholds. 'I see,' replies the enchantress, 'a god coming up out of the earth'¹—and among these was the figure of an old man covered with a mantle. Angry at being disturbed, the spirit inquires: 'Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?' and thereupon proceeds to disclose in menacing language the fate of the guilty monarch. In this brief narrative there is no inconsistency, though there be one circumstance respecting which our curiosity would gladly be satisfied: Did the Hebrew people of that age believe like the pagans in a nether world, and regard it as the abode of certain gods, who emerged from their dark Plutonian mansions to accompany the prophet?

If Shakespeare had the apparition of Darius in his mind's eye, as seems probable, he has in some respects improved upon his original. Nothing can be grander or more effective than the opening scenes in 'Hamlet.' There is in most minds—perhaps in all—something of a belief in the doctrine that the material world is belted round by another, peopled with spiritual, or, as Shakespeare would perhaps have called them, metaphysical, existences which press upon us 'fools of nature' and fill our minds with rapture or horror. Night, solitude, silence, broken at intervals by moaning of the wind or splash of the ocean surge, with nothing but the twinkle of stars to mitigate the darkness, are able to throw lonely watchers into a frame of thought

¹ Revised Version of the Holy Bible, 1885.

favourable to superstitious influences. Thus we find Bernardo, Marcellus, and Horatio, in a bitterly cold night on the platform before the castle at Elsinore, discussing the apparition of the royal ghost, Horatio doubting, and the other two avouching what they had twice seen. To mark the time Bernardo says :

When yond same star that's westward from the pole
Had made his course to illume that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one,—

Mar. Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes again!

Ber. In the same figure, like the king that's dead.

Horatio's doubts being dispelled, he, as a scholar, is desired by the two soldiers to speak to the ghost, which in spite of his fear and wonder he does :

Hor. What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? By heaven I charge thee, speak!

Mar. It is offended.

Ber. See! it stalks away.

Hor. Stay; speak, speak! I charge thee, speak! [*Exit Ghost.*]

From this and what follows, it is obvious that Shakespeare here intends to vouch for the reality of the ghost's appearance, though, as we shall elsewhere discover, he afterwards peremptorily denies the reality of such apparitions. Here, however, the narrative is explicit, positive, and confirmed by the testimony of three witnesses. Horatio having been thus convinced, the dialogue enters upon a speculation as to what such an apparition boded to the State; from which it is made evident that they entertained no suspicion of what had taken place in the palace, by which the young lord Hamlet, for whom they all cherished an

attachment, had been defrauded of his right, he being the true heir to that crown which his uncle has usurped and now possesses. While they are busied in this discussion, the spectre breaks in again upon their sight :

Hor. But soft, behold ! lo, where it comes again !

[*Re-enter Ghost.*

I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay, illusion !

If thou hast any sound, or use of voice,

Speak to me :

If there be any good thing to be done,

That may to thee do ease and grace to me,

Speak to me :

[*Cock crows.*

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,

Which, happily foreknowing may avoid,

O, speak ;

Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life

Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,

For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death,

Speak of it : stay, and speak ! Stop it, Marcellus.

Mar. Shall I strike at it with my partisan ?

Hor. Do, if it will not stand.

Ber. 'Tis here.

Hor. 'Tis here.

Mar. 'Tis gone ! [Exit Ghost.

We do it wrong, being so majestic,

To offer it the show of violence ;

For it is, as the air, invulnerable,

And our vain blows malicious mockery.

As the 'Eumenides' of Æschylus has outlived belief in the Erinnyes, so 'Macbeth' will probably survive belief in witchcraft, though, so long as men have faith in the existence of their own souls, the notion will be more or less widely cherished, that what survives the grave may, under certain conditions, and to answer certain ends, become visible. The supernatural in 'Hamlet' will consequently continue to find acceptance by mankind long after the superstition which

forms an integral part of the basis of 'Macbeth' shall have become effete. According to the direction in which speculation is at present advancing, we are likely soon to adopt the Indian notion, that by piety and philosophy men have given themselves souls, and may yet augment the power of those souls indefinitely.

Meanwhile, are we also drifting towards that Hellenic theory, which teaches that the disembodied spirit passes necessarily into a form or vehicle which, though subtle and shadowy, is still material, and may therefore at times be visible? Science does not even pretend to understand all the conditions of our existence: how the principle of life, which is so subtle as to defy even the perception of thought, clothes itself with substance and form, evolves from its own nature ideas reaching upwards to the Divine Author of all things, diffusing themselves through all space, so as to envelop the whole creation in their grasp, and at the same time striving, though vainly, to penetrate the secret of their own existence, whence they emerge, on what they feed, and whether, after flashing for a moment over the surface of being, they vanish into nothing or merely surge forward out of sight, as they are urged along by the succeeding waves of other ideas.

On this track, science seldom finds itself, either because it despairs of arriving at profitable results, or because, beyond certain limits, the speculator will find no followers. Whatever view Shakespeare may have taken of the goal to which philosophy leads us, he took the fancies, beliefs, and speculations of mankind as he found them, as materials to build up his plays. Hamlet is a man who has lost his way in a vast

wilderness of thought; everything in the horizon of his observation perplexes him: his father's sudden death, his uncle's marriage with his mother, his own exclusion from the throne. Owing entirely to the inactivity of his character, which amounts to stupor, he looks around him in helpless indecision, persuaded he ought to act, but altogether uncertain how or what to do.

Assuming that the spirits of the dead are acquainted by unknown means with what is going on in the spirits of the living, Shakespeare represents the soul of Hamlet's father, as still, even amid the flames of Purgatory, yearning with affection for his unhappy son. The poet himself felt no little perplexity how to bring about an interview between the living and the dead: the obvious course would have been, to conduct the ghost into Hamlet's chamber, or to the scene of one of his solitary walks, where out of sight and hearing of the world they could commune together. But the exigencies of his art suggested a different course. He desired to establish in the minds of the audience a conviction of the ghost's reality, though at the expense of its logical powers, and the supernatural scenes as we find them in the play are the result. While the prince is in his worst state of bewilderment, the three ghost-seers present themselves before him.

In the colloquy that follows, Hamlet, having alluded sarcastically to recent events, says 'I think I see my father.' Upon which Horatio inquires :

Where, my lord ?

Ham. In my mind's eye, Horatio.

Hor. I saw him once ; he was a goodly king.

Ham. He was a man, take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.

Hor. My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

Ham. Saw? who?

Hor. My lord, the king your father.

Ham. The king my father!

Horatio then recapitulates the circumstances attending the ghost's appearance to him, upon which Hamlet expresses his resolution to join them in their watch about midnight. The suspicions he had previously entertained now crowd upon his mind in greater strength, for, as his father's spirit is in arms, his belief and expectation are, that the foul practices of his mother and uncle are to be disclosed to him that night by the ghost.

All playgoers as well as readers are familiar with what immediately follows between the Danish prince and his father's spirit, which, though upon the whole a fine example of dramatic art, is disfigured by some blemishes. The spirit having divulged to him the true state of things, his mother's debasement, his uncle's crimes, his own unjust exclusion from the throne, he believed or did not believe the revelation. If he extended to it his faith, he should at the same time have cherished for the revealer both implicit trust and reverence; yet when he is seeking to exact an oath of secrecy from his companions, and the ghost from beneath the earth seconds his desire, he addresses it in a jocular tone as 'Truepenny,' 'fellow in the cellarage,' 'old mole,' and after recovering a more proper tone of mind exclaims 'Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!'

For what reason are we to suppose that Hamlet shifted his ground, and addressed wild words to the spirit beneath the earth? Was it lest his intentions to keep secret what had ranspired should be frustrated

by the ghost's imprudence? Unless this was his apprehension, we must tax him with levity, and if it were, he had already begun to be sceptical respecting the nature of the apparition. He afterwards, in order to justify his irresolution, sophisticates with himself, and tries to believe that the ghost might have been a devil, and now while it was boring through the ground under his feet, to give proof of its anxiety for the success of his designs, he fears it might be wanting in policy—a weakness of thought marking the obliquity of Hamlet's character. In his dialogue with the ghost, when the impression made by its disclosure of the murder was fresh upon him, he exclaims :

Haste me to know 't ; that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.

When, however, the full revelation has been made, he is stunned by the magnitude of the enterprise, and immediately proceeds to invest his design with doubts and misgivings, which betray him into his habitual procrastination.

Shakespeare found the difficulty of allying the natural with the supernatural all but insurmountable, and, having made the ghost perform his part in a few brilliant scenes, he calls upon it no more save once during the remainder of the tragedy. We may imagine indeed that, as often as it is permitted to revisit earth, it hovers about the last object of its solicitude ; for in the scene between Hamlet and his mother the ghost is present, and by an act of volition renders itself visible at the critical moment, to withhold the prince from becoming the rival of Alcmaeon and Orestes. Here the ministry of the ghost ends, he

has played out his part, and retires to sulphurous and tormenting flames, respecting the duration of which the son is doubtful :

And how his audit stands who knows save heaven ?
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
'Tis heavy with him.

I have elsewhere spoken of Ariel, and the fairies which shed so much beauty on 'The Tempest' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.' In 'Antony and Cleopatra,' as well as in 'Julius Cæsar,' the supernatural is had recourse to, though, instead of being heightened by the poet's imagination, it is, especially in the latter play, tamer and more flat than in history. Brutus, sitting up late in his tent at Sardis, while everything around in the camp was still, is reported by the old priest of Chæronea to have beheld a spectre, which entered the tent door and stood near him. Hearing footsteps, Brutus, who had been reading, looked up, and, beholding the strange figure, inquired whether it were a god or a man. The phantom answered 'I am thy evil genius, Brutus, and will meet thee again at Philippi.' 'Then,' replied the general without being at all disturbed, 'I shall see thee.'

Out of this anecdote, repeated with variations in the life of Cæsar, Shakespeare has fabricated what follows :

Enter the Ghost of Cæsar.

Bru. How ill this taper burns ! Ha ! who comes here ?
I think it is the weakness of mine eyes
That shapes this monstrous apparition.
It comes upon me. Art thou any thing ?
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That makest my blood cold and my hair to stare ?
Speak to me what thou art.

Ghost. Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

Bru. Why comest thou ?

Ghost. To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi.

Bru. Well ; then I shall see thee again ?

Ghost. Ay, at Philippi.

Bru. Why, I will see thee at Philippi then. [*Exit Ghost.*

Now I have taken heart thou vanishest :

Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.

Here Shakespeare not only falsifies history, but perverts the doctrine of antiquity that every man had a good and an evil genius—an opinion wholly distinct from anything connected with ghosts.

Just before the final overthrow of Antony, who affected to believe he was descended from Hercules, strange musical sounds were heard by night in the streets of Alexandria, together with the hurried tread of a multitude of persons making towards the gate leading out of the city to the enemy's camp. Having described two soldiers entering to their guard, two other soldiers likewise come in, and the following dialogue takes place :

[*Music of the hautboy as under the stage.*

Fourth Soldier. Peace ! what noise ?

First Soldier. List, list !

Second Soldier. Hark !

First Soldier. Musio i' the air.

Third Soldier. Under the earth.

Fourth Soldier. It signs well, does it not ?

Third Soldier. No.

First Soldier. Peace, I say !

What should this mean !

Second Soldier. 'Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved,
Now leaves him.

Plutarch's narrative, as Shakespeare read it in North's translation, is to this effect :—'The selfsame night, within a little of midnight, when all the city was

quiet, full of fear and sorrow, thinking what would be the issue and end of this war, it is said that suddenly they heard a marvellous sweet harmony of sundry sorts of instruments of music, with the cry of a multitude of people as they had been dancing, and had sung as they used in Bacchus' feasts, with movings and turnings after the manner of the satyrs, and it seemed that this dance went through the city unto the gate that opened to the enemy's camp, and that all the troop that made this noise they heard went out of the city there. Now such as in reason sought the depth of the interpretation of this wonder thought that it was the god unto whom Antonius bare singular devotion to counterfeit and resemble, that did forsake him.'

In two other well-known passages Shakespeare again makes use of supernatural machinery—in the death scene of Queen Katherine, and in Posthumus's vision in prison ; but these two passages, especially the latter, have so little merit that they need not be more particularly referred to.

ESSAY XV

ESOTERIC OPINIONS OF SHAKESPEARE

I HAVE already observed that indications are discoverable in the plays, of the existence in the writer's mind of opinions and beliefs in some respects different from those of his contemporaries. On many occasions he says one thing but apparently means another, not merely different, but subversive of it altogether ; so that we appear, while reading, to be engaged in the interpretation of hieroglyphics, scarcely less perplexing, perhaps, than those which torture our curiosity on the monuments of Thebes or Philæ. In this respect, however, he differs from other men only in degree, since every individual that lives, be his intellectual domain great or small, contrives to keep some portions of it involved in Eleusinian darkness, so as to be to that extent an enigma to his friends.

In Shakespeare's case, owing to the greatness of his mental powers, to the clearness and depth of his understanding, to the subtlety of his thoughts, to the boldness of his philosophy, to the immense variety of his acquisitions, to the beauty and soaring nature of his genius, we are stimulated by a more than usually strong desire to lift the thick drapery which he has let fall between his spirit and ours, and extort from him a key to his most hidden convictions. The inscription on the statue of Neith at Sais : ' I am all that has been, is,

or shall be, and no mortal hath ever drawn aside my veil,' scarcely awakened a more earnest search among the philosophers of Egypt, than the desire to ascertain the conclusions he had arrived at, among the students of Shakespeare.

The investigation may be idle, since Truth is as willing to be communicative to us as she was to him, but as by his numerous artistic creations he has enthroned himself in our love, our desire to be satisfied as to what he thought on several momentous subjects is necessarily commensurate with our partiality.

Shakespeare was too familiar with the history of humanity not to be fully alive to the danger of disclosing his secret thoughts, if they happened to be at variance with those which are commonly entertained. John Huss, Jerome of Prague, Urbain Grandier, Servetus, and many others who paid the penalty of plain speaking, warned him to be on his guard, and he was otherwise rather inclined to live on good terms with his neighbours than to provoke them to make a martyr of him. It could have done no one any good to behold him on a pile of faggots in Smithfield, or languishing like Raleigh in the Bloody Tower; so he studied the art of reserve, of expressing himself by equivocal symbols, of investing startling ideas with the mantle of orthodoxy, of agreeing with his contemporaries in show, while in substance he and they may have been wide as the poles asunder.

Seeing how easily he might be crushed by the collision of the two Churches, he was careful not to place himself between them, that no one among his contemporaries could say towards which he leaned, or whether or not he leaned to either. There existed at that time in England a sect of thinkers, not perhaps so

small as might appear at first sight, which included Bacon, Raleigh, Henry Percy, Harriot, Hues, Warner, and others, and the question often suggests itself, Did Shakespeare belong to the sect? A tolerably thick volume has been written to prove that he went in many respects beyond most of its members, though the notions of the writer are so little exact that he confounds theism with its opposite.

If we carefully consider the ideas which meet us constantly in the plays, we shall probably discover reasons for thinking that Shakespeare did not secretly pride himself on his strict orthodoxy, though such was the refinement and subtlety of his policy that no class of thinkers could positively claim or disclaim him. From the 'Shepherd of the Ocean' down to the humblest sectary there were believers and unbelievers of all shades among his audiences at the Blackfriars and the Globe, and it was for his interest to dismiss them all in good humour with themselves and with him.

From the analogy between the ceremonies of the Catholic Church and those of the drama, a marked fondness for the stage has always been observable among the professors of that form of Christianity, and Shakespeare, consequently, was peculiarly solicitous to avoid giving utterance to sentiments which might have alienated from him so large a portion of his hearers. Indeed the extreme tenderness noticeable in his treatment of nuns, monks, and friars has led many to infer that he was himself one of those recusants who, in the times of Elizabeth and James, constituted so large a portion of the population. The only case in which his impartiality failed him was in the matter of the Puritans, whom in obedience to the prejudices of the

Court and the nobility he imprudently assailed, and thus aided to some extent in estranging from the theatre that great party of stern and haughty Englishmen who were so soon to be in the ascendant in the State.

Yet I would by no means be certain that Shakespeare held opinions different from those of the Puritans. His position as a stage player or a manager seems to have justified in his eyes the habit, not unknown in any rank or condition of men, of putting on for convenience the thickest possible veil of hypocrisy. Leicester, till he succumbed to what Fra Paolo calls Italian physic at Cornbury, had been, notwithstanding the incidents of his life, leader of the Puritan party; Essex was at the same time a Protestant and a Catholic, which may have been the case also with Southampton; Elizabeth prayed with the Protestant doctors, but hanged them when they went too far; and James, born of a mother whom history alternately presents as a martyr and a murderess, never throughout his life discovered exactly what he was, but hung, like Mohammed's coffin, between earth and heaven, so thoroughly devoted to the one that he scarcely dared look up at the other. Among such contemporaries what could Shakespeare do? His secret feeling is well expressed in the words of the old song,

My mind to me a kingdom is,

and this realm so far differs from other kingdoms that it cannot be invaded without the consent of its sovereign.

Though we know not what ideas are, whether they be spiritual or material, eternal or fleeting, we do know that they are often possessed of a ravishing and divine

beauty, and that to move among them is to be, as it were, rapt into the seventh heaven. That Shakespeare was in the habit of enjoying this delight we may infer from the words of Prospero, who bids Ariel—that is, one of his ideas to which he had given a name—appear before him invested with all the loveliness of a nymph of the sea. It is within the competence of all creative minds to ascend when they list to those celestial regions where everything that is sweet and beautiful resides, and to revel there amid divine forms and types of splendour which know no reflections in the sphere of the outer world. Here is Olympus, here are the courts of Jove, here alone Apollo's lute, strung with his hair, sounds for ever, and here Shakespeare found those images and fancies which he spent his whole life in endeavouring to shower forth through language upon mankind. To enter here is to be in the private apartments of Nature, where nothing unholy can ever be found, but instead, Truth unveiled, ready to be embraced by all who dare aspire to become her worshippers. Shakespeare, it cannot be doubted, did so aspire, and held converse with her out of hearing of the world.

To emerge from these cycles of thought, and accommodate itself to the coarse, rough business of life, is regarded by the mind in certain moods almost as a profanation. Yet Shakespeare often found himself on the steep declivity, leading to still worse results. He had to say what he did not believe, to do, perhaps, many things which he condemned as evil, to stand bareheaded before men whom Nature had formed to be his servitors, to bend his will, originally it may be stubborn in such matters, to the will of others, who willed what no sophistry could reconcile with the

strict law of rectitude. His inborn idiosyncrasies were cast in the fairest mould of refinement itself, yet the necessities of his position may have constrained him occasionally to tolerate ethical lapses which he despised; for misery, he tells us, acquaints us with strange bed-fellows.

Stung by self-reproach, in this way, perhaps, generated, he sadly exclaimed :

O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means which public manners breeds.
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
And almost thence my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand :
Pity me then and wish I were renew'd.

And what did he work in? And what were his harmful deeds? As he has supplied us with no answers to these questions, they must remain unanswered for ever. In the matter of opinion it is in some degree at least different, since, if we cannot arrive at absolute certainty, we may make some approaches to it. In the turbulent society by which Shakespeare was surrounded, there were two antagonistic principles at work—the monarchical and the republican, and while energy was secretly ebbing out of the one, it was in the same degree flowing into the other.

To these momentous processes Shakespeare's attention could not be otherwise than directed, partly because they bore upon the very existence of the theatre, but chiefly because they deeply influenced the whole political and social economy of the world. In practice, though not perhaps in theory, Shakespeare was an Epicurean, and, in spite of the grandeur of his genius,

could not persuade himself that greater happiness may be enjoyed with truth in a garret than with vice and error in a palace. Like other sceptics of his time, he had little faith in the professors of wisdom :

Was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently,
However they have writ the style of gods
And made a push at chance and sufferance.

The purchase of houses and lands at Stratford supplies the best commentary upon this passage ; he had no taste for sitting with Diogenes in his tub, or for wrapping himself with Epictetus in his servile gaberdine :

Video meliora proboque,
Deteriora sequor.

Hence many of the apparent contradictions in the plays. To thrive, the writer found it necessary to restrain his sympathy for the system of things to come, which could bring him no profit, and appear to sympathise with the things that were, which could. At the summit of human affairs, as they then existed, sat Despotism enthroned ; Elizabeth herself was no less jealous of her absolute authority than James ; and therefore, when the poet ventured to

tell sad stories of the death of kings,

he found it incumbent on him to guard strictly against the suspicion that in his secret soul he looked with extreme indifference at their fate. Coleridge observes that while the republican principle is predominant in Massinger, and the doctrine of Divine right in Beaumont and Fletcher, Shakespeare's leanings are towards aristocracy. In this case, however, he makes between him and Massinger a distinction without a

difference, since the aristocratic principle is as completely republican as the democratic.

Whatever form of civil polity may have appeared best to Shakespeare, it certainly was not the monarchical, which, as often and as openly as he dared, he held up to public scorn, not indeed where the question was directly under consideration, but after the theatrical manner by innuendoes and asides. Many of his kings are usurpers, some of them murderers, nearly all of them despots or knaves. If he was as great a proficient as I suppose, in the art of looking into the seeds of time, and determining which of them should grow and which should not, he must have foreseen the utter blight and mildew of many which to the common eye seemed likely to flourish. Without anticipating the advent of a Utopia, Shakespeare's convictions were profoundly revolutionary, and, as far as they exerted any influence on the minds of those who studied him, paved the way to those great convulsions that almost immediately followed.

A prince is seldom chosen for the speaker when the object is to inculcate democratic principles; yet instead of selecting any inferior character, by whose lips to express his own opinions, Shakespeare puts forward as his representative in this matter one of the haughtiest members of the regal caste in Europe. Standing before the caskets at Belmont as a suitor for Portia's hand, and reading in the inscription on that of silver,

Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves,

the Prince of Arragon exclaims,

And well said too; for who shall go about
To cozen fortune and be honourable
Without the stamp of merit?

that is, who shall presume to wear honours bestowed by the 'fool multitude' without deserving them? Yet, looking abroad in the world, in how few cases do we observe the merit proportioned to the honour!

O, that estates, degrees and offices
 Were not derived corruptly, and that clear honour
 Were purchased by the merit of the wearer!
 How many then should cover that stand bare!
 How many be commanded that command!
 How much low peasantry would then be glean'd
 From the true seed of honour! and how much honour
 Pick'd from the chaff and ruin of the times
 To be new-varnish'd!

Harry Vane, or Pym, or Hollis, might for the sentiments have written this passage, in which the grandees of the seventeenth century might perceive in what light they were regarded by one of the greatest thinkers of the time.

Farther on in the same play, law, theology, and beauty might learn what the 'player man' thought of them:

The world is still deceived with ornament.
 In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
 But, being season'd with a gracious voice,
 Obscures the show of evil?

Seasoned with the same gracious voice, evil was perhaps quite as often made to assume the show of good, as when, bribed by the present of an estate, a foul murderer was pronounced innocent, while to please the Court the noblest man then living was immured by law during a large portion of his life in the Tower.

We discover by the mummies that long ere Memnon fell before Troy, 'beauty's dead fleece' was employed to make another gay; so we can feel no surprise that the ladies of Venice and London in Shakespeare's

time had recourse to the same artifice to conceal the ravages of years or the parsimony of Nature.

When Burbage pronounced the following passage at the Blackfriars many a fair occupant of the foremost benches must have winced secretly while her female rivals tossed their own living fleece in triumph :

Look on beauty,
And you shall see 'tis purchased by the weight ;
Which therein works a miracle in nature,
Making them lightest that wear most of it :
So are those crisped snaky golden locks
Which make such wanton gambols with the wind,
Upon supposed fairness, often known
To be the dowry of a second head,
The skull that bred them in the sepulchre.

When Shakespeare wrote 'Romeo and Juliet,' the world appeared to him in all the gloss and splendour of beauty, as it is invariably painted by youth and hope ; but care, study, and the drudgery of the stage stripped it gradually of these brilliant colours and made him long to escape from it that he might meditate on its deceit and hollowness in the quiet seclusion of Stratford :

O God ! O God !
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world !
Fie on't ! ah fie ! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed ; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

Among the subjects on which men are most tolerant is that of morals, which, though always fluctuating and differing essentially in different countries, is yet commonly assumed to be everywhere the same, and to be placed under the guardianship of that internal judge, conscience. Here, more than in any other

department of philosophy, Shakespeare found it incumbent on him to cultivate an esoteric system. He did not and could not think as his neighbours thought—I mean such of his neighbours as were engaged in watching over other people's morals, however they might neglect their own. If we accept the doctrine that no two men either are or ever were exactly similar in all respects, physical and intellectual, it follows necessarily that their ethics, which are only the result of their idiosyncrasy, must differ in the same degree with the other attributes of their being.

Yet in all countries a pattern is set up by authority, in strict conformity with which everybody is expected to shape his conduct.

But when men agree to live together, whether in larger or smaller numbers, do the majority possess by nature the right to lay down absolute rules for coercing individuals in the matter of ethics, so that each of them shall only say and do what other persons find it convenient to say and do? What, in fact, are ethics? Are they not simply that aggregate of minor laws which human intelligence has established for promoting the happiness of individuals, both separately and collectively? Everything which renders a man happy as an individual and as a member of the community is good, and everything which has a contrary tendency is evil. If morals were placed on this basis, it would be found necessary in most cases to revolutionise society, since things indifferent in their nature are often pronounced wrong; while the name of virtue is sometimes bestowed on actions the tendency of which is to generate misery and suffering.

Society has in nothing exhibited so much caprice and ignorance as in its attempts to regulate the inter-

course of the sexes, in which it has nearly always substituted violence for gentleness and instruction. Irregularities were punished in Shakespeare's time by causing the erring individual, if married and a female, to stand wrapped in a white sheet at a church door, for the edification of those undetected sinners who went in and out; and in other cases by being stripped half naked and scourged in the public streets. Harlots in high places were not, it will readily be believed, visited with this rough chastisement. Elizabeth multiplied her lovers with impunity; James's mother and wife, though equally lavish, were less fortunate in their amours; the great ladies of Elizabeth's and James's Court, from the Countess of Northumberland and Lady Rich down to the fair Bridges, practised the greatest licence with impunity; and it was only when they added murder to their other peccadilloes, as in the case of Lady Essex, that morality thought it necessary to avenge itself. Shakespeare, however, insinuates that adulteresses were as plentiful as blackberries, and puts into the mouth of Lear his reproof of those who punished them with brutality:

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!

The mask of madness is here made to perform good service:

Lear. Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

Glo. Ay, sir.

Lear. And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office.

Some critics maintain that Shakespeare does not, like Beaumont and Fletcher, treat magistrates with contempt. I scarcely, however, know a passage in any dramatist that bears upon them more roughly

than the following, which may, moreover, be paralleled with many others :

See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear : change places ; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief ?

The old king, however, does not stop here ; he looks around him, and finds something to say of other classes of men :

The usurer hangs the cozener.

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear ;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks ;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

From the passages conceived in King Cambyses' vein, found here and there in the plays, especially in 'Coriolanus,' it might be inferred that Shakespeare imagined human society to be disposed like rocks on the surface of the globe—in strata with the brightest and most beautiful uppermost. Very different were his real convictions. If he had his prejudices on this subject, they were rather in favour of the lowly than the high, since you often find in his serving women and men, in his dependants and his fools, more real faith and fidelity than in his princes and grandees. In 'As You Like It' the very soul of gratitude and affection is found in old Adam, and if the young noble repays it, his virtue is only the reflection of his servant's. In 'Timon' whatever beauty or moral grace there is breaks forth through the awkwardness and disadvantages of the humbler classes, while the opulent and the great exhibit no qualities but those of baseness and ingratitude. Not that Shakespeare had deluded himself into the belief that pure and excellent qualities flourish exclusively in any rank of society, or

that poverty is the only nurse of virtue ; but experience had taught him that

Adversity,
[Though], like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.

In fact, one of the first among the lessons of philosophy, to whatever source we may trace the instruction, is that the human soul never acquires its greatest strength and beauty till it has been chastened and disciplined by suffering. Of this truth Greek tragedy is full, and Shakespeare, who in this respect thought as Æschylus thought, abounds with evidences of the same conviction. In 'Richard the Second' and 'Henry the Fourth' he concentrates in comparatively few scenes the essence of all the teaching of history, namely, that they who are elated and insolent in prosperity are in the same proportion base and abject when prostrated by sickness and calamity.

But the truth, which neither experience nor literature nor philosophy will ever cause to be generally accepted, though in theory it was accepted by Shakespeare, is that all the misery of civil society springs from the worship of power and grandeur by the multitude. In this consists the original sin of human nature, compounded of meanness, weakness, and conscious baseness. Hence the predominance of rank over worth, of authority over virtue. If Shakespeare's opinions were universally prevalent, what havoc would they not create in the world ! It may be all very well to hear him lecture on set occasions by the mouth of Ulysses or others on the benefits of order, when we find from numerous incidental expressions with what scorn he internally regarded it :

Great men may jest with saints; 'tis wit in them,
But in the less foul profanation.

That in the captain's but a choleric word,
Which in the soldier is flat blasphemy.

Authority, though it err like others,
Hath yet a kind of medicine in itself,
That skins the vice o' the top.

If it be not evident from what I have written that Shakespeare's mind was filled with that assemblage of qualities which we call wisdom, the reader has only to study the plays to become possessed by the conviction. Meanwhile, had Shakespeare yielded obedience to the Delphic principle 'Know thyself'? Throughout his writings we seem, I think, to be communing with a mind which shows no disposition to succumb to any other, but puts forth its conclusions in the full persuasion that they can never be gainsaid. What his faults were he knew better than anyone else, and could have made out such a catalogue of them as might have startled his innocent worshippers. Yet looking upon his productions, one and all, he felt the unutterable delight of knowing that his mind had given birth to offspring which would thenceforward be the companions of the human race for ever. What was murmured two thousand years ago at Rome—*non omnis moriar*—he in the same spirit murmured to himself in London:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme.

But why should his rhyme last? Is it not for the same reason that the springs of the desert are kept open by the Arabs? They drink of them, and are

refreshed, and are therefore careful not to blot out the tracks leading to them. That which is always fresh and pleasant cannot be suffered to die. If the reading of Shakespeare were a task, if it led to nothing but maxims and moralities, it would speedily be relinquished as a tedious occupation. Shakespeare had learned how to play on that most beautiful of all instruments—the human heart, and has brought forth from it the sweetest of all melodies. He is justified, therefore, in saying with the great historian, that he bequeaths mankind his works :

'Gainst death, and all-oblivious enmity,
Shall you pace forth ; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.

But the ground on which he then built would have left his name stranded amid the formless ruins of oblivion, had not his genius piled upon those powerful rhymes something incalculably more powerful. In the confidence, however, of youthful genius, he deals in gorgeous promises to his friends :

Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
And tongues to be your being shall rehearse
When all the breathers of this world are dead ;
You still shall live—such virtue hath my pen—
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

If these lines were written before the completion of 'Romeo and Juliet,' he counted on what he hoped to do, not on what he had done ; but when that play was finished he felt that he stood on a level with the greatest peers of intellect, and that the extinction of his fame could only take place when, in a more complete sense than that in which he used the phrase, 'All the breathers of this world are dead.'

ESSAY XVI

POLITICAL AND MISCELLANEOUS OPINIONS

WHEN Shakespeare looked around him he could not fail to observe what was the prevalent mode of thought in political matters: in Elizabeth's reign everybody worshipped, or professed to worship, the Queen, not merely as sovereign, but as a woman. Not to regard her as wisest, discreetest, best; not to descant on her golden locks, her sweet voice, her imperial walk; not to maintain that in the arts of sway she was as just and as wise as Jove, and that her moderation and gentleness were equal to her wisdom, was almost to be guilty of treason. Hence the happy phrase of

Vestal throned by the west,

and hence the prophetic outburst of Cranmer over her cradle, foretelling that when the baby lying there should be a woman the world would witness a return of the Golden Age. Still more tyrannous was opinion in James's reign. The King's political doctrines being in the highest degree arbitrary, his manners offensive, and his morals dissolute, it was almost understood to be a necessity to uphold 'the right divine of kings to govern wrong.'

Bacon and even Raleigh, whatever they may have thought secretly, bowed the knee to despotism, not awkwardly and grudgingly, but with apparent earnestness and delight. What less therefore could be expected of Shakespeare? They stood upon that high and pleasant mount, where he imagines Fortune to be throned, at the bottom of which, though as yet they knew it not, their career was to terminate. Shakespeare already stood on that low social level, condemned to live more or less by flattery, by vailing his lofty brow to every minion of fortune, by calling black white and white black, by suppressing in his soul every nobler sentiment, when he saw or suspected it might interfere with his bread and cheese.¹

Never therefore did man with an intellect of vast capacity labour under more powerful temptations to fabricate an esoteric system of opinions, and to preserve their incognito through life. He probably prayed, in the words of Naaman the Syrian, 'When thy servant goeth into the house of Rimmon' etc., for assuredly he could not bow the knee voluntarily to the idols he pretended to admire and worship.²

¹ After the death of Elizabeth, Shakespeare spoiled Cranmer's prophetic speech by introducing a fulsome panegyric on this vilest of kings, to whom, and not to Raleigh, he attributes the founding of our colonial Empire :

Wherever the bright sun of heaven shall shine,
His honour and the greatness of his name
Shall be, and make new nations.

² Most persons have read or heard, whether they have profited by it or not, the story of the woman taken in adultery. Shakespeare had profited by it, and condemning the practice of his time, sought to recommend a more merciful system of morality than that which he saw in vogue. Unchastity is certainly an offence, but not in any case punishable by law, though the brutal notions of our ancestors

On questions of morals it was, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, no less imperative to conceal any tendency towards heterodoxy. Indeed, in all ages and countries there is, and has been, a certain ethical pattern set up after which everybody is expected to fashion his proceedings, as well as his ideas, of what is right or wrong ; but, considering the infinite varieties of human character, the prevalence of understanding in some, of imbecility in others, the existence in many minds of what may be called a moral twist or contortion which often proves incurable, a disinclination to conform, in matters of passion and emotion, to established types : in short, all forms of individualism or idiosyncrasies combine to render it impossible that all men should think or act alike, either in their relations to one another or to society at large. But there is a convenient vice which, when possessed in its largest development, influences mankind like virtue and creates at least a semblance of peace and goodwill among them—I mean hypocrisy. It is this alone that enables a man to go through the daily round of life without at every step coming into collision with some sharp angle of his neighbour's character, and thus giving or receiving wounds that may rankle for ever.

led them to whip women at a cart's tail for a breach o' chastity. Seeing thoroughly the wickedness of such an act, Shakespeare yet thought it only safe to condemn it through the mouth of a madman :

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand ! etc.

In looking at the constitution of social life, and beholding dishonest wealth fastening with the fangs of law upon dishonest poverty, he exclaims :

Go make thyself like a nymph o' the sea.

For spirits . . . with ease

Assume what sexes and what shapes they please.

POPE, *Rape of the Lock*, i. 69-70.

You may know that man to be a knave, and that woman to be a courtesan ; but if circumstances compel you to associate with one or both of them, policy closes your lips not only when they are present but when they are absent also. 'The world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players' ; which shows that Shakespeare had made up his mind to play his part so as to shock as little as possible the susceptibilities of those about him. No man appears to have derived more satisfaction than he from the doctrine in the old song,

My mind to me a kingdom is.

If a man be determined to cage his thoughts, he is their absolute master ; he can arrange them, discipline them, throw them into innumerable combinations and watch the results ; he can make them play tricks for his amusement and lead them out into forbidden grounds, can set them at entire difference from the rest of the world, can condemn what he sees or hears, can believe or disbelieve, can overthrow cities, dethrone kings, extirpate religions, practise all kinds of virtues or indulge in every conceivable modification of vice, and yet walk with a smooth face among his neighbours. 'Fronti nulla fides,' observes the Roman historian who passed his life among deluding masks ; and Shakespeare, surrounded by analogous circumstances, has given us an admirable translation of the phrase :

There's no art

To find the mind's construction in the face.

No, there is no such art, which, like all other men, he found highly advantageous to his fortunes. Bacon, when he wrote his Essay on 'Wisdom for a Man's Self,' regarded this closeness, as he terms it, as one of

the most valuable attributes of man. If you have it, you live in an' impregnable fortress with all your intellectual wealth exclusively at your own disposal ; neither cajolements nor menaces nor law nor despotism can compel you to yield up one jot of what you have within. The soul may safely take sanctuary there and bid defiance to the arts and power of everything finite. Our predecessors used to think, and Mr. Froude among late writers agreed with them, that pain or torture applied without mercy can wring truth from the boldest nature. Experience and history prove the contrary. Everybody remembers the Pythagorean woman whom a tyrant desired to betray her friends ; when the extremities of torture appeared to be on the point of overcoming her firmness, she bit off her tongue and spat it in the monster's face. Her mind was her kingdom, and she defended it to death. Insanity can only shatter the defences of this fortress, it cannot destroy them : death only can achieve that work.

If, as I suppose, Shakespeare had in his mind many things which he found it convenient to conceal, he was wise enough to commune with his own heart in his chamber, and to put a padlock on his tongue when outside of it. With him, esoteric opinions were a necessity. Orthodox opinions, while they occasion no shock in society, are equally distant from affording much pleasure ; they are regarded as matters of course, and the men who profess them often pass among the discerning for hypocrites, who, as a rule, are not worth being unmasked. It is only erratic forms of thought, which run counter to received doctrines, that excite astonishment or hostility. In religion the case is still worse than in morals or politics. Formerly any deviation from the crooked line which people call

straight put a man in danger of being grilled, fried, or roasted alive, in the presence of priests and potentates, to whom his groans sounded like music; and it can scarcely be doubted that, if this pleasure still suited the taste of the majority, grilling or roasting a neighbour would afford supreme satisfaction to many orthodox thinkers. No one can have observed much of what passes around him without discerning in mankind symptoms of a strong yearning in this direction. The deity probably in whose honour the torch would now be lighted is not God but gold; yet the devotion, instead of being weaker than for the object of solicitude in the Middle Ages, is much stronger. The omnipotence of property, however, has been so thoroughly established, and so widely accepted, that nothing new can be said upon the subject. One of our poets, who meant right though he expressed himself wrongly, says:

Let honours and preferments go for gold,
But glorious beauty is not to be sold.

If we attach the ordinary signification to his words, instead of subscribing to the truth of his dictum, we should say there is not a greater drug in the market than beauty, which, with however many reservations, is always to be purchased. He meant, however, that an ugly woman could not buy it, and might have added that though she could not do that, she might invest herself with a far superior beauty, though not quite so visible to the eyes of fools. Fortunately for Shakespeare—or rather, perhaps, for us—he had no taste for being grilled, so he took refuge in the enigmatical style of writing, and when he said what he thought, was careful to put it in juxtaposition with

something he did not think, and so provided himself with a loophole to escape through in case of difficulty. How far he agreed on certain matters with Essex or Southampton, neither he nor either of those earls could possibly know, because each had his esoteric theory, to which none of them put the key out of his own hands. Essex could pray with a Protestant doctor openly in church or chapel, while he plotted or equivocated with a Jesuit in a back parlour ; so likewise could Southampton ; and if Shakespeare was not called upon to perform a similar feat, it was because he came less prominently forward in the world's eye. His audiences were made up of professors of the two rival religions, so he had devout and holy men of either church, who might be appealed to in proof of his secret orthodoxy as a Protestant or as a Catholic. Nay, if he wished to stand well in the estimation of philosophers, as Bacon, Raleigh, Northumberland, and his three magi, he could point to passages in his plays quite as heterodox as any of their positions. If he laughed and joked and talked nonsense at the Mermaid, as is popularly believed, and as, for aught I know, may be true, he doubtless took care that his heterodoxy, if he had any such ingredient in his composition, should not be made palpably evident to Master Benjamin Jonson, whose familiarity with the backstairs of ministers could hardly be unsuspected by him. It was probably as a hint to his Mermaid friends, who may each have desired to interpret him in his own way, that he wrote :

When my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at.

It is clear from this and many other passages that Shakespeare prided himself on not being easily read by those about him; he had to buy bedsteads and hangings and other household stuff for Anne Hathaway and her children; he had to look forward likewise, and take all the care he could, that when the winter of old age came on, he should not be left bare to weather, and therefore was not at all disposed to throw open the avenue to his inner system of thought, if by so doing he should run the risk of diminishing his chances of fortune. Like many other writers, he may meanwhile have desired to pass for a jovial companion, with nothing secret or designing in his nature, and his manners accordingly may have proclaimed as much. Pope, whose very soul had been disciplined by Jesuitism, had the effrontery to say

I love to pour out all my self as plain
As downright Shippen or as old Montaigne.

Whatever Shippen or Montaigne may have done, Pope's esoteric opinions were so carefully guarded that no one knew in his lifetime, or knows yet, what on many subjects they were. Indeed, he cleverly suggests that he did not know himself. Talking of controversial divinity, he says 'I am always of the opinion of the last book I read.' He was therefore orthodox and heterodox by turns, and so perhaps was Shakespeare, which may account for the difficulty we experience in trying to get at his secret opinions, which may on some points have been fixed, on others fluctuating. The world has seen a whole octavo volume written with the design of proving him to have been an atheist. Such demonstrations remind one of what Byron says :

When Bishop Berkeley said there was no matter
And proved it, 'twas no matter what he said.

A book was once written in order to show that Nero was a prodigy of virtue, and Aristophanes undertook to demonstrate that Socrates was a thief and a rascal. The attempt to establish Shakespeare's atheism may range very properly with such undertakings. Many writers have displayed their ingenuity in a contrary direction, and maintained that Shakespeare's great object in writing was to obliterate the heresy of the Reformation, and reinstate in universal favour the

Milk-white hind unspotted and unchanged.

From what point of view Shakespeare regarded this same hind it seems difficult to discover. It is no less difficult to find proofs of his leaning to any sect in religion, though possibly by a careful sifting of his language we may find the direction in which his preference is moved. He beheld on all sides proofs of that liberty of interpretation to which I have alluded already :

In religion,
What damned error, but some sober brow
Will bless it and approve it with a text ?

Here the only thing that suggests an objection is 'damned error'; for why should any error be damned or damnable, which is what he means? No man adopts an error if he knows it to be an error; it is because he does not know it to be an error, but mistakes it for truth, that he adopts it, especially when he can bless it and approve it with a text; and it would be hard indeed if in a whole body of literature—which the Bible is—produced in different ages by different men, we could not find something in support of different opinions. But what were his own opinions? Were they consistent or inconsistent with those

established at that period in England? We may almost conjecture that he regarded some of his own conclusions as heterodox from the vehemency with which he pleads the cause of toleration. His manner seems to imply that his refined and subtle intellect had penetrated farther into the mystery of the universe than most, perhaps than any, of his contemporaries except that arch-heretic Raleigh, who carried with him over the ocean a mind as profound and uncircumscribed in its dimensions. The human understanding was then engaged in fighting, sometimes with good sometimes with bad weapons, the battle of toleration; and the dominant doctrine, which of course vindicated to itself the claim to orthodoxy, provoked several bold and intemperate men into the adoption of doctrines as wild and lawless as the one they combated. Giordano Bruno, Vanini, Rabelais, and Spinoza made in their day fierce protests against that dogma which had for so long a time been disturbing the peace of all Catholic countries—I mean Papal infallibility. There probably will come a time when the fanatical style of thinking still so prevalent in Europe will be regarded with as little reverence as we regard the superstition of the sable fetish-worshipper.

But was Shakespeare a papist? That remains to be inquired into. Was he a partisan of monarchy or democracy—that is, had he made a progress in political science which would have enabled him to run abreast with the most advanced thinkers of the present age? If not a Catholic, was he a Protestant? Or did he belong to that section of mankind which, without lying in the slough of atheism, abjures received opinions and fabricates a religion for itself? Did he, with Jeremy Taylor, discover anything sacred

in the marriage-ring? Or did he with his acquaintance Henry Percy, ninth Earl of Northumberland, regard all women, married or single, as fair game, to be pursued at pleasure through all the turnings and windings of social life? Was he a respecter of law? Or did he regard it as a contrivance to quibble men out of their natural rights? What were his opinions of Jews and heretics, of pagans, and fetish-worshippers? Did he regard nuns as brides of heaven, or as creatures without understanding? Why did he not visit Raleigh in the Tower? Was it through respect for Whitehall, or through aversion to the character and principles of the man? Certain men of subtle and profound thought, who through protracted meditation on human nature may be supposed to have formed a wise and true theory of it, have decided practically, that the best thing that can be done for men is to deceive them. Did Shakespeare accept or reject this opinion? If we examine the intellectual condition of mankind, we shall probably be led to the conclusion that imposture, variously modified, governs them all, or that at least very small sections escape from its tyranny. Map the whole mental surface of the world, and ask yourself how many of the great divisions into which human beings may be cast can possibly be in possession of truth. Some individual in remote times invented a form of belief and organised a system of thought which, by his superior energy and genius, he caused to pass from his own mind into the minds of a large portion of his contemporaries; and the ideas he then implanted in them, instead of withering and dying out, have in many cases survived the shocks of time and political revolutions, and kept possession of the

minds of the descendants of the first converts up to the present hour.

The reason is, that thinking boldly and independently is attended with prodigious mental toil, and at the same time impeded by fear. The notions a man receives from his predecessors are held to be something sacred, and this persuasion imparts to them a tenacity which, in many cases, renders the adoption of new opinions impossible. The mind appears to be completely fashioned, coloured, and characterised by the principle residing within, and could be more easily shattered than remoulded. Indeed, few things would seem more easy than the shattering of the mind, since the world is filled with persons whose faculties have, more or less, given way before very slight causes. The incapacity to measure the finite against the infinite, accompanied by the fear that for fleeting and transient acts men may be condemned to unending misery, overthrows the understanding of myriads. So, again, the belief that some individual for whom a preference is entertained sets no value on that preference, but on the contrary is devoted to another, is cause sufficient to disorder the brains of men and women, and reduce them for life to the condition of a mental wreck. Why should these things happen? Could they be prevented by discipline and culture? Religions in which imagination plays too great a part can scarcely be said to be a blessing to mankind, who are then most happy when their whole being is under the guidance of reason, which is not a dry, insipid principle, as many believe, but a sort of deity in the soul, fashioning all its creations into forms of beauty, and directing men towards the source of all beauty and all love.

When reason therefore predominates in an age and subordinates imagination to its rule, the nations under the sway of this principle enjoy a considerable amount of happiness, and continue to enjoy it till sloth or negligence extinguishes their prudence. Did Shakespeare by his writings encourage a tendency to retirement and contemplation, or an active attention to the duties of life? He somewhere says 'the soul's joy lies in doing'; was he constant and consistent in that opinion? Some learned men in whom learning had overlaid and stifled the natural faculties, so as to disqualify them for determining the value of their own possession, have put forward the theory that the free play of Shakespeare's genius would have been obstructed by the possession of more extended knowledge. Shakespeare himself seems not to have been infected by this doctrine, since we appear to discover everywhere in his writings proofs that he grasped eagerly at all kinds of knowledge and was proud of the variety of his acquisitions. In whatever direction his thoughts moved, he watched and noted down their discoveries, and immediately gave them a place in his intellectual domain. His busy life, the calls made incessantly upon his time, the distance placed by circumstances between him and certain kinds of knowledge, circumscribed the field of his acquisitions, but never deterred him from seeking to augment his mental wealth. We may therefore be almost certain that he thought knowledge no encumbrance, and would have been glad to cultivate a familiarity with the thoughts and ways of all nations and all ages, had he possessed the necessary leisure. In fact, he believed, or seems to have believed, that a man fights the better for being provided with the necessary weapons, as well as with

the skill to use them. When we find him venturing beyond his depth and treating subjects with which he had not familiarised his mind, we are made conscious of the painful struggles he makes to conceal his want of knowledge by a display of gorgeous rhetoric and of that prolific invention with which nature had so prodigally enriched him. He had no doubt adopted the ancient opinion that, '*Sapere est fons et norma loquendi*,' which means that nothing renders a man so eloquent as a thorough comprehension of what he is speaking about. In fact, let the instructed mind turn where it will, it discovers springs of reflection, topics of illustration grounds for argument, together with a force that renders argument triumphant.

Among the commonplaces adopted by commonplace thinkers, not the least unphilosophical is the common notion that men are the same in all ages. The direct contrary is capable of demonstration if by men we mean their mental idiosyncrasies and course of thought. It is obvious, for example, that when nearly all those who imagined themselves to be thinking eagerly erased the '*Politics*' of Aristotle, several plays of *Æschylus*, *Sophocles*, and *Euripides*, the *History* of *Theopompus*, in order to write on the parchment the stories of saints and fabulous martyrs, they could by no means be the same as those who lived when the works so erased were written.

It is reasonable to infer that Shakespeare gave his preference rather to the wild and lawless in thought than to those whose mental operations were regulated by authority; but owing to the system he adopted we are left to draw inferences, and to base our judgment upon them, instead of being able to affirm with assurance that such or such were his opinions.

No one can doubt that Shakespeare's views of the social system then existing in England were in a high degree unfavourable, since he has sketched it as it appeared to him in 'Timon of Athens,' whose character may have been suggested to him by that of the Earl of Essex. Timon's generosity, not being under the guidance of wisdom or even of common sense, was lavished on the unworthy, and accordingly when he came to be overtaken by calamity his false friends disappeared from about him. No picture of human experience is more common than this. They have in the East an agreeable story, not perhaps as old as that of the real Timon, but older than Shakespeare's. 'There lived, we are told, in Bagdad a young man who had inherited great wealth, and had surrounded himself with a hundred friends, neither more nor less. One day a dervish, returning from Central Asia, came to partake of his hospitality, and, observing the profusion in which he lived, called him aside and said "Verily, if thou wilt permit me, I will show thee a favour." "Father, say on," replied the young man, "I am open to counsel." The dervish then said "Conceal carefully what wealth is left, pretend to be overtaken by calamity, apply to thy friends for aid, and thou wilt make a discovery." So the young man concealed his riches, put on the habit and manner of one who is ruined, and went forth to taste the bounty of his friends. Of these ninety and nine looked coldly upon him, professed their inability to be of service to him, and almost jostled him out of their houses. As he was repairing to the dwelling of the hundredth, he made reflections unfavourable to human nature, and thought with what shame he should return to the dervish, whom he had stunned with the praises of his

friends. He scarcely thought it worth while to try the character of the remaining friend, so grievous was his disappointment; but, to fulfil his promise to the dervish, he persevered and knocked at the door. The master, who had observed his approach, would not allow the door to be opened for him by a slave, but hastened to descend that he might open it himself. Observing the sad appearance and demeanour of his visitor he exclaimed "What has happened, and wherefore art thou sad?" "I am a ruined man," was the reply. "Nay! not so," said the friend, "thou hast yet an abundance of wealth"; and without pausing to hear any further words the master of the house took his friend by the hand, which he pressed tenderly, and led him into a large warehouse, where he said to him "Look around thee, and behold the wealth which thou hast laid up against evil days." "I see the wealth," replied the man, "but it is not mine." "Say not so," replied his friend, and, calling to a number of his slaves, he ordered them to bear forthwith the gold, jewels, and rich stuffs which were piled up around to the house of the supposed ruined man. "Stop, stop," cried he, "what I have said is but a fiction; by the advice of a dervish have I tried my friends, and thou alone hast been found worthy of the name." "Let me prove that I am so," replied the hundredth man, and peremptorily commanded his servants to do as he had at first ordered them. He then proceeded with his friend to the dervish, and they sat down and rejoiced together that one man out of a hundred was found in Bagdad who deserved the honourable appellation of friend.'

The belief is not uncommon that Shakespeare thought humbly of himself, and scarcely expected his

own works to survive, for which reason the people who hold this belief think that after his plays had been produced, and brought him what profit they could, he troubled himself no more about them, but proceeded to write new ones. No one, however, who carefully examines his writings can take such a view.

Among the poets most confident of fame Shakespeare must be placed in the first rank. In Sonnet xviii, addressing his dearest friend, he tells him that he could not possibly be forgotten :

Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest :
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

Again in Sonnet xix :

Yet, do thy worst, old Time : despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young.

And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,
When that shall fade, my verse distills your truth.

liv.

Then do thy office, Muse ; I teach thee how
To make him seem long hence as he shows now.

ci.

We find him, in fact, so thoroughly persuaded of his own superiority that, alluding to a majority of the poets of his own time, he says :

I had rather be a kitten and cry mew
Than one of these same metre ballad-mongers.

His contempt for cut-and-thrust soldiers was no less ; for he makes one of the exponents of his private thoughts exclaim :

I had rather be a dog, and bay the moon,
Than such a Roman.

Nay, through the mouth of another he expresses the extremity of scorn for the slaughtering class :

I had rather be a tick in a sheep than such a valiant ignorance.

And again, passing from one great fighter to another, he says :

A great deal of your wit, too, lies in your sinews, or else there be liars.

Elsewhere, when reflecting on the power of his own genius and measuring his creations against the force of time, he affirms :

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme ;

'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth ; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.

The same confidence is elsewhere expressed in more vivid language in a passage already quoted :

Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
And tongues to be your being shall rehearse
When all the breathers of this world are dead ;
You still shall live—such virtue hath my pen—
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

It was through no peevish impiety, but through the bewildering bitterness of a galled mind, that Shakespeare almost accuses the heavens of injustice. It was to give vent to this feeling, and yet to shield themselves from the charge of impiety, that mankind invented a deity and enthroned it, no one knows where, upon whom they might bestow every injurious epithet, and so exhaust the vindictive impatience with which they

endure their calamities. This deity they called Fortune, by which many of the children of genius besides Shakespeare have thought themselves hardly used.

Into the mouth of Sextus Pompeius he puts what was certainly his own sentiment :

Well, I know not
What counts harsh Fortune casts upon my face,
But in my bosom shall she never come
To make my heart her vassal.

A propos of Pompey, however, it may be said that when Fortune came to him in all her gorgeous garniture he repelled her, through a vain scruple, and thereby lost the empire of the world, which the counsel of Menas would have secured to him.

There is more or less of tragedy in every man's life, though in most cases it is hidden tragedy—the tragedy of the soul; born, perhaps, of the womb of guilt, but only the more terrible on that account. This tragedy is more or less intense in proportion to the amount of the sufferer's sensibility. In some this displays itself through a perpetual fretfulness, which is the external indication of the goading weariness existing within. But when the mind is great, and yet subordinated by circumstances to the sway of other minds, in their nature far inferior to itself, the tragedy, however deep, is invisible, though the action is perpetually going on and growing more intense as the powers of life develop themselves. The organisation of society, co-operating with natural idiosyncrasies, condemns many to this species of intellectual martyrdom. When men of extraordinary powers are able to shake off entirely the shackles of conscience, they study, from the moment they become

conscious of their force, every means of traversing the interval lying between them and success, and employ it without regard to the misery or ruin they may bring upon mankind. This mode of judging and acting is what they who suffer by it regard as supreme wickedness. There is much, however, in the modes of thinking of men in general which goes far towards explaining, though not justifying, the daring course of superior intellects. If born by chance beyond the verge of those tracts of life which are illuminated by fortune, they are constrained hourly to witness those acts of baseness and servility with which a majority of mankind seek to flatter and conciliate the possessors of power and opulence, though gifted by nature, it may be, with no inherent titles even to respect. That Shakespeare writhed under the conviction of this truth is certain. Around him, whether in high situations or low, he saw no equal in those rare endowments which Nature bestows, in genius, in opulence of ideas, in wisdom, equal to the reconstruction and impressing of a new character upon civil society. Yet, look in whatever direction he might, he beheld a superior, patron, master, raised by the idolatry of the vulgar almost beyond the reach of his imagination. To these individuals the coarse necessities of life compelled him to pay homage, to burn incense, to recognise them as their supreme arbiters of his destiny. Were such circumstances reconcilable with social contentment, with self-respect, with mental serenity? To feel thus would have been to jump, as he himself expresses it, with the fool multitude. To the fetishism of that multitude he traced the throes and agonies of his great soul when, in compliment extern, he appeared to fawn on those whom he

despised. They, bedizened with opulence and gorged with wealth, were born, he knew, 'to eat, to drink, to propagate and rot'; while he, by the necessities of his own nature, was engaged in generating thoughts which would put—though not in forty minutes—a girdle round about the earth to fade only with the human race itself.

Everybody is familiar with the allegory of Prodicus—the Choice of Hercules—in which the hero, in spite of the most bewitching allurements, prefers virtue to vice. But the picture is drawn after the manner of moralists, not of philosophers; for vice does not present herself in the tawdry frippery which she wears in the sophist's production, but too often steals in, in the rear of some gigantic passion, which completely obscures her approach, till her presence, felt rather than seen, has softened the heart, and rendered it tolerant of her familiarity. Shakespeare's life was probably one long tragedy, interspersed with pleasant episodes, but terminating in delirium. It is true he laughs in his plays, but it is seldom with the laughter of the heart:

Full in the fount of joy's delicious springs
Some bitter o'er the flowers its bubbling venom flings.

His melancholy is genuine; no flush of good fortune comes without some drawback of evil; even his fools perish in their folly, while the greatest and noblest natures he portrays are entangled in the net of destiny and perish miserably. Nothing bright and beautiful sets precisely as it rises, but the splendour in which it comes forth soon suffers the eclipse of affliction. Domestic felicity, nobility, riches, are blighted by love, which should be their ornament and

preserver; power comes forth by the same throes as guilt; philosophy itself screens not its owner from blight and ruin; and even the most harmless innocence is brought to a premature grave by the gloom and perversity of others. The world is:

An unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

Looking keenly at the circumstances of society, Shakespeare discerned and has described the fallacies by which men are usually deluded. It is an old saying that 'Wisdom crieth in the street, and no man regardeth'; but let the same Wisdom cry out in a palace, and she will be sure to command attention. The reverse also is true—that is, nonsense or folly uttered by men in high places may either be made to pass for wisdom, or if united with ever so much wickedness will be sure to be excused.

Having materials of this kind of which he wished to be delivered, Shakespeare cared much less than he ought about framing his plots and laying a probable foundation. He shirked the groundwork altogether in the best way he could, and trusted to what he meant to build on it for the effect he desired to produce.

ESSAY XVII

LANGUAGE

SOME years ago a theory was in vogue among us which taught that the language of all our great writers, if not pure Anglo-Saxon, approximated nearly to that dialect. The language of Shakespeare, however, though it be English, is not Anglo-Saxon, but a rich assemblage of ornament, like a Corinthian capital, made up of all known languages, and luxuriant even to redundancy.

The Athenians when they planted their colonies in Asia, and carried on commerce with the greater part of the ancient world, gradually imported new words with their merchandise, until the Attic came to be distinguished from the other dialects of Greece by a certain foreign aspect which some regarded as a beauty, others as a defect. But, whether defect or beauty, such is the aspect of the English language, made up of spoils from all cultivated nations, trophies of commerce or conquest.

In truth, the speech of a wide-ruling people, which through some of its relations, pacific or warlike, touches upon all parts of the world, must of necessity exhibit a character expressive of its political position, which in the case of England is that of the foremost among nations, colonising, subduing, civilising, till it can scarcely be doubted that as centuries roll on it will exercise command over the greater part of the earth.

The masters of English thought may look forward therefore with pleasure to the vast field prepared for their ideas by the arms, enterprise, and industry of their countrymen; and I have shown already that among these masters Shakespeare ranks with the highest, nor is his language less deserving of admiration than his ideas. Spenser speaks of Chaucer as a pure well of English undefiled, though in truth he is almost as much Norman as English: that is, in his vocabulary, for the structure of his style is in most cases conformable to the type of our natural speech. This is still more true of Shakespeare, who, though he takes words from all sources within his reach, welds them together after the English fashion, so as to make them appear perfectly at home in his style; sometimes, when they will serve his purpose, he uses the simplest words, like one who culls bouquets from the wild flowers on a heath. Yet he is never sweeter than at such times, never more musical, never nearer to the inner emotions of the heart:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude;
Thy tooth is not so keen,
Because thou art not seen,
Although thy breath be rude.

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
Thou dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot:
Though thou the waters warp
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remember'd not.

Above, in the fifth line, the poet suggests, though in a way liable to be misunderstood, that when he who is guilty of ingratitude is far away out of sight, the

wound he has made in the heart is like one received from external nature, whereas his presence must augment and exasperate the pain. Contrast with these elementary expressions, so to speak, the fiery eloquence of Lady Macbeth :

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty ! make thick my blood ;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it ! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief ! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, ' Hold ! Hold ! '

This speech, in the gloomiest vein of tragedy, exhibits the workings of a mind not naturally cruel, but bent on perpetrating the worst of crimes at the prompting of ambition. The speaker is a woman, young, a mother with milk in her breasts, and therefore alive to all the tenderest sympathies of nature, yet in grasping at the golden round of sovereignty, ready to ally herself with hell. Words gush from her heart like gouts of blood ; her imagination, though on fire, is dark with guilt, so that, like her husband, she is not only ready but eager to jump the life to come.

This, the chief among what are generally reckoned Shakespeare's great women, yields the first place, however, in my estimation to the young and beautiful

Capulet, possessed by a no less powerful passion, and, while keeping in the strictest limits of purity, displaying a strength of will, a fixedness of purpose, and a fierce indifference to life and death which no criminal heroine in Shakespeare or any other dramatist can outdo. Love, properly understood, fills more completely than ambition or any other guilty or equivocal passion the circle of existence, and creates in the soul a world more grand and priceless than the external universe. Juliet, inspired with all the poetry of youth, invokes in the interest of her love influences no less potent than those abjured by Lady Macbeth, and in the wild turbulence of her soul invests her ideas with the brightness of the morning star :

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging : such a waggoner
As Phaethon would whip you to the west
And bring in cloudy night immediately.
Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaways' eyes may wink, and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen.
Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties ; or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods :
Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle ; till strange love, grown bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.
Come, night ; come, Romeo ; come, thou day in night ;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.
Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night,
Give me my Romeo ; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,

And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Here, though the passion underlying the words be almost breathless with eagerness, the thick-clustering imagery, the numerous phrases suggesting widespread associations, the lavishly piled up vestments of thought, so veil the voluptuous longings of the speaker, that though we discern the burning current of her imagination, we are less impressed by it than by the childlike simplicity in which she clothes her desires. Shakespeare, we are assured, was young when he wrote this play; yet, whatever his age may have been, he had certainly reached the acme of his intellectual power, and acquired a mastery over language which at no subsequent period of his life did he augment.

No one comprehends exactly what imagination is, or can explain whence it borrows its riches, any more than we can tell from how many kinds of sweet flowers the bee gathers its honey. One emotion only pervades the whole of Juliet's speech—one instinctive outbreak of love, one primary impulse of nature; yet words which are among the most beautiful of beautiful things are so profusely conjured up, and darted like meteors over the substratum of passion, that our fancy is dazzled almost to blindness by their united blaze.

When afterwards in her nuptial chamber Juliet, in a state of terror and excitement approaching madness, meditates on the doubtful effects of the potion given her by the friar, the language of her soliloquy assumes a character as dark, wild, and awful as that of her former speech was resplendent with brightness and beauty:

How if, when I am laid into the tomb,
I wake before the time that Romeo
Come to redeem me ? there's a fearful point !
Shall I not, then, be stifled in the vault,
To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in,
And there die strangled ere my Romeo comes ?
Or, if I live, is it not very like,
The horrible conceit of death and night,
Together with the terror of the place,—
As in a vault, an ancient receptacle,
Where, for these many hundred years, the bones
Of all my buried ancestors are pack'd :
Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
Lies festering in his shroud ; where, as they say,
At some hours in the night spirits resort ;—
Alack, alack, is it not like that I,
So early waking, what with loathsome smells,
And shrieks like mandrakes' torn out of the earth,
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad :—
O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
Environed with all these hideous fears ?
And madly play with my forefathers' joints ?
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud ?
And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone,
As with a club, dash out my desperate brains ?

The language of some writers, it is said, resembles a statue—that of others a picture. But a statue read by the imagination contains within itself innumerable pictures and poems. Assume it to be of marble, white, lustrous, with a surface almost transparent with brilliancy, and reflect upon the swarms of ideas which settle upon every part of it ; say it represents Artemis, or Leda, or Aphrodite : and will not 'the bosky dells of Arcady,' the dusky glimmer of the Alpheus, the snowy plumage of the divine swan, the twinkling of Idalian woods, and the coruscations of the sportive and sunny waves out of which the goddess sprang in

foam—will not these and a thousand images flash athwart our fancy's horizon as we gaze?

Shakespeare's language is an endless succession of statues and pictures, hurrying the imagination over land and sea, now throwing forth glimpses of the constellations and all the glittering splendour of the starry cope, and now settling in ecstasy on a woman's eyes. He may not, perhaps, have been directed in this process by principles of art, but by that divine frenzy for which, knowing no name, we substitute the result and call it inspiration. Words properly considered are so many points of light, every one of them throwing out a halo around it; yet when they are employed to body forth certain trains of thought, certain groups of ideas, or certain portions of the outer world, they sometimes acquire a power which acts on our soul like magic.

Yet, though of all man's inventions language be the most marvellous and sublime, its inadequacy to express several objects, internal and external, must be obvious to all who have sought to avail themselves of its resources, to paint the ideal creations of the mind, or the loveliness of external nature where nature is loveliest—in a tropical landscape in spring. There is a particular spot in the valley of the Nile, lying south of a little rocky promontory jutting out from the eastern mountains into the river, the beauties of which I have never been able to paint in words, nor could Shakespeare himself have succeeded perhaps, had he tried. I came to it early in one of those mornings in which for splendour, and its effects upon the soul, earth may vie with heaven. The ground was carpeted with a thick covering of matted grass, drenched with dew and profusely studded with wild flowers, white

crimson, and bright blue, into whose deep chalices the wild bees descended with delicious murmurs, while flights of butterflies of the most brilliant colours alighted noiselessly on herb and shrub. The air was so sweet that it was a happiness to breathe it, while the sun, in its real vernal fervour, threw floods of golden light over land and water, from a sky of amethyst. But did the beauty of this landscape lie all outside of me? For the effect which it produced on my mind, were there not many causes at work, not material in their nature? With the sense of remoteness, with perfect solitude—for there was nothing living in sight—did not there mingle a joy springing from the realisation of a lifelong cherished wish, together with the hope of affording pleasure to those I loved, by dwelling on the beauty and grandeur that surrounded me? Memory, however, recalls the scene, though sculptured on it by my own experience, less frequently than several passages of Shakespeare—such as the night scene in the garden at Belmont, the sunny seclusion and quietude of the Forest of Arden, and that song in ‘Twelfth Night’ which ‘Dallies with the innocence of love, like the gold age.’ Sometimes scraps of verses will spring up without any apparent cause in the mind, though doubtless tracing their advent to some association too faint to be discerned: for instance—

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank,

Who loves to lie in the sun! etc.

Though ignorant of what goes before and comes after, these unconnected lines will call up in your fancy lovely pictures of things external or internal, upon which the imagination will delight to dwell.

Rousseau, in his dreamy moods, used to think with delight on the ends of lines or fragments of verse, of which he never could recall the remainder. One of these :

Tircis, je n'ose
Ecouter ton chalumeau
Sous l'ormeau ;
Car on en cause
Déjà dans notre hameau.

Un berger
S'engager
Sans danger ;
Et toujours l'épine est sous la rose.

suggests a moral sentiment not very recondite, but sweet to remember. The memories of all men probably contain similar fragments. It is only necessary to set the memory in motion, to call up a number of passages of the most delicate beauty :

Lacing the severing clouds with streaks of grey.

Come unto these yellow sands.

To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,
To throw a perfume on the violet.

He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines.

Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear,
Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green,
Or, like a nymph, with long dishevell'd hair,
Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen.

Witness this primrose bank, whereon I lie.

These blue-veined violets, whereon we lean.

Like a red morn, that ever yet betokened
Wreck to the seaman, tempest to the field.

Venus's eyes

Shone like the moon in water seen by night.

Look, the world's comforter, with weary gait,
His day's hot task hath ended in the west;
The owl, night's herald, shrieks, ' 'Tis very late';
The sheep are gone to fold, birds to their nest,
And coal-black clouds that shadow heaven's light
Do summon us to part and bid good night.

Or stonished as night-wanderers often are,
Their light blown out in some mistrustful wood.

Lo, here the gentle lark, weary of rest,
From his moist cabinet mounts up on high,
And wakes the morning, from whose silver breast
The sun arises in his majesty;
Who doth the world so gloriously behold
That cedar-tops and hills seem burnish'd gold.

My throbbing heart shall rock thee day and night.

An hour before the worshipp'd sun
Peer'd forth the golden window of the east.

All so soon as the all-cheering sun
Should in the furthest east begin to draw
The shady curtains from Aurora's bed.

From the above, and from a thousand other passages that might be added to them, it will be seen that Shakespeare was master of an almost limitless vocabulary; yet, when he comes to use it in descriptions of the human form, he seldom succeeds in presenting us with a complete picture. Passages suggestive of particular beauties are innumerable, and he has sometimes endeavoured, as in the case of Lucrece, to melt all these together and produce a whole; but he is elaborate, without being true to

nature, and piles up quaint expressions with more than Dutch industry, yet scarcely at last presents us with the idea of a lovely woman. Indeed, poets have seldom succeeded in drawing a true picture of female beauty. The image nearest to completion is that of Eve, by Milton; and yet, to take in the whole of his conception, we must put various parts of his poem together, and so build up for ourselves an idea of her matchless loveliness. When Shakespeare has to delineate Venus herself he rather throws forth hints than describes her form; and so in every other part of his works, where he desires to place before us a portrait of perfect loveliness, he affords us a glimpse of some particular features and then glides off to some other topic; even Juliet's beauty is suggested, not described. Speaking of eyes, he calls some 'lights that do mislead the morn'; and of the bosom he says :

Hide, O hide, those hills of snow,
That thy frozen bosom bears,
On whose tops, the pinks that grow
Are of those that April wears.

It has been objected that pinks do not flower in April, but Shakespeare speaks of them as things cold and premature. When an idea of beauty is sought to be conveyed, it is generally by its effects rather than by any reference to its real essence; persons are smitten by it with love, and, the effect being such, we might infer the potency of the cause.

Dramatic poets, it may be said, do not deal in descriptions; but Shakespeare is fond of them in all other cases, and it is only when he comes to attempt a portrait of female beauty that his language fails him. Cleopatra on the Cydnus is represented in the

midst of a laboured description, but is not herself described, neither are the damsels who surround her. Hero, Beatrice, Imogen, Desdemona, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Rosalind are invested by our imagination with particular forms and features by the time we have familiarised ourselves with the plays in which they appear; and probably our ultimate conceptions of them correspond with those of the poet himself, though the reader feels the want of more complete descriptions.

In 'Othello,' on the other hand, we regret that some things which are introduced had not been left out—as thick lips, sooty, and other epithets applied to the Moor.

Gibbon remarks that style is the image of character, and this mysterious principle, coming down to the individual through thousands of generations, throwing its force outwards through figure and lineaments, renders the man what he is in mind and body. We have no portrait of Shakespeare from which we can argue anything respecting the harmony between the intellect and the countenance; but I make no doubt that were the living man before us we should be able to trace the luminous beauty of the soul in its material covering. What he himself says of Cressida is true of all human beings :

There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip,
Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out
At every joint and motive of her body.

Omitting the epithet, the description will hold universally, for, whatever the individual is within, Nature labels the truth on the exterior, so that whoever understands the art of reading her superscriptions may dive into the souls of all around him.

With regard to Shakespeare we have no helps towards understanding him but those words which anyone, it has been said, may move about like men upon a chessboard and put in any positions and combinations he pleases. Many writers think so, but Shakespeare could scarcely have been of their opinion ; if he was, however, we are under no necessity of adopting his faith, since what really belongs to a man's character will pierce through ten thousand disguises and reveal his idiosyncrasy in spite of all his doubles. By this I am far from meaning that all the crotchets a man cherishes may be certainly inferred from his writings ; but the make of his mind, his habitual leanings, the uppermost among his passions, his virtues, his vices, even to the minutest natural foible, are indelibly impressed upon his language so that not one of them can escape detection.

Many persons appear to confound thoughts and opinions with sentiments and feelings ; Shakespeare himself does :

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face ;

where, if his words express a meaning, he is altogether wrong. What he desires to say, however, is that the ideas hidden behind the countenance cannot be divined by its expression, though no one knew better than he that cruelty, sternness, gentleness, loving propensities, and an amorous temperament inscribe themselves as legibly upon the countenance as words on the pages of a book.

If we apply these words to himself and his writings, we shall find them far more blabbing than the veined violets which Venus pressed ; for here the man comes

forth dressed in all his idiosyncrasies, which were many and various. This fact accounts for the immense variety observable in his language.

When a man borrows another man's words, it is as easy to perceive that they do not belong to him as if he had borrowed another man's garments. Shakespeare's language is pre-eminently his own, for it is easy to discern that it fits the assemblage of his ideas, which is vast and multitudinous. Sometimes, however, he discovers in his mind a series of ideas for which his language supplied him with no corresponding words—that is, words qualified to express the subtle variations of the ideas :

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven ;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

This passage is rendered perfectly chaotic by a defect either in the English language or in Shakespeare's vocabulary. For, what is to body forth but to invest with form? and what is form but shape? Plainly stated, therefore, the meaning is that the imagination shapes forth shapes which the poet's pen again turns into shapes. Looking back, however, to the origin of this process, we may contemplate the mental faculty seizing upon the crude materials of ideas and moulding them into forms, which the poet's pen invests with words, and, thus clothed, sends forth into the world supplied with meaning and a name. This is one example of the difficulty which Shakespeare sometimes experienced in ordering the tumultuous rush of his ideas,

which came upon him like inspiration upon the Pythoness.

Everyone knows that the action of the senses constantly passes through states, which, though they leave images impressed upon the mind, have never yet found utterance in words. When we have made use of the terms taste, feeling, hearing, smell, and sight, if we desire to go farther and characterise any of these acts of sense, or any change in their condition, we immediately find ourselves at a loss, and have to borrow from the experience of one sense, to express the peculiarities of another :

The man who hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of *sweet* sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils.

Here, we are said, by implication, to taste a sound. Again when we say 'a soft air,' we are said to feel a sound, which of course metaphysically we do, since whatever makes any impression, no matter through what channel, on the brain, we may be said to feel. Hence comes the phrase a feeling mind, applied to one who experiences sympathy for others, which is a sort of permissible tautology, since to sympathise is to feel with. Shakespeare, however, does not strain at slight differences, but, taking words with a lavish hand, scatters them profusely over his quick-coming fancies, whether exactly adapted to them or not; sometimes, reasoning from a defective analogy, he attributes to one type of existence what belongs to another, but, by this metathesis, produces an effect more forcible than by a statement of simple truth :

The poor beetle, that we tread upon,
In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great
As when a giant dies.

This according to circumstances may be true or false, since a giant struck by lightning, or who had his head shattered to atoms by a cannon ball, feels no more than the beetle. The logical fallacy lies in the words 'corporal sufferance,' since the body as body feels nothing, but is indebted for its susceptibility entirely to the mind; and, the mind of the beetle being somewhat limited in its capacity, its sufferings must be limited in proportion. But it is the effect of genius to ennoble everything it touches, to find

Books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in every thing.

What we see around us is thus made to reciprocate our feelings, to hold intercourse with us, to know as it is known, and thus to become our companion through life. From this form of thought sprang the worship of the sun and moon, which men informed with spirit and understanding according to dimensions much greater than their own, first loved or feared and then worshipped; rivers, mountains, winds, had in this system a soul and a will, with equal power to give efficacy to it:

As the rudest wind,
That by the top doth take the mountain pine,
And make him stoop to the vale.

The power of painting in words possessed by all forms of composition belongs more especially to poetry, which not only places images before the mind, but acts upon the imagination and fancy almost like material beings: 'versus digitos habet.' No doubt the effect of poetry depends in great measure on the complexion of the reader's mind, since words which fall flat on the fancy of one person will suggest images

of beauty and splendour to another. Sometimes their power depends on accidental associations; thus the adjective *ἀγάννιφος*, 'very snowy,' which is applied by Homer to Olympus, has always appeared to me to be one of the most beautiful of words, though I have never known anyone else who thought so. The same fortune must attend Shakespeare's most poetical expressions. One of the characteristics of his style is heterogeneity; yet, if carefully studied, all the forms of his language will be found to have a family stamp upon them, since, vast as is the range of his vocabulary, scarcely any word he has used can be pronounced, at least in company with another, without being known to be his.

Possibly, his childhood and youth having been passed in the country, his fancy may have derived from that circumstance much of its rural character. Things unnoticed by or unknown to other poets spring up in him spontaneously, and in places where they might be least expected, though their significance can only be conjectured by those whose early lives have been spent under similar conditions. The Danish Queen, describing Ophelia's crown of weeds, speaks of long purples,

That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.

A town poet, let his observation have been ever so extensive, could hardly have alluded thus to the vocabulary of the shepherds.

Again, Mercutio says:

And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit
As maids call medlars, when they laugh alone—

language which must be unintelligible to the dwellers in great cities. Examples of similar enigmas are numerous in Shakespeare, and there may probably be many which escape the most observant of readers.

His descriptions of flowers are as fresh as the flowers themselves :

The marigold, that goes to bed wi' the sun
And with him rises weeping.

.

O Proserpina,

For the flowers now, that frighted thou let'st fall
From Dis's waggon ! daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty ;

. pale primroses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phœbus in his strength—a malady
Most incident to maids.

Throughout the plays, wherever an opportunity presents itself, his fancy teems with rustic images—acorn-cups, cowslips, and lavender :

When daisies pied and violets blue
And lady-smocks all silver-white
Do paint the meadows with delight.

But, in truth, there is scarcely anything apt to occur to a rustic fancy to which he has not alluded, nor are the passions of the soul, the feelings of the heart, nor the wildest extravagances of the imagination less familiar to his mind. To read him, therefore, is to glance over the greater part of the world, animate and inanimate, and the pleasure he affords is co-extensive with the range of his imagery.

ESSAY XVIII

PLOT AND STORY

CONSTRUCTING plots is not Shakespeare's *forte*. There is not, in fact, in all his plays a single plot well constructed. In 'Lear' there is, properly speaking, no plot at all, but a number of distinct contrivances developing themselves in the most horrible manner, one repulsive act following close upon the heels of another, until ultimately the stage is left reeking with blood like a slaughter-house. It is difficult to discover what he really aims at in this tragedy, which is replete with contradictions, with acts of hideous cruelty, contrasting certainly with displays of fidelity, gratitude, affection, loyalty, and devotion. Two series of tragic action run through the piece—the tragedy of Gloucester and the tragedy of Lear—and these, exhibiting themselves alternately, dispute for pre-eminence in the interest they excite; as in 'Macbeth,' we must seek for the germ of the drama in events antecedent to its commencement. Through the effects of years, possibly, and possibly through other causes, Lear, when he comes before us in a scene which should really be enacted nowhere out of Bethlehem Hospital, is undoubtedly in a state deserving of commiseration. He talks several times in the course of the play of losing his wits, but he had lost them before it began, though it is doubtful whether Shakespeare did or did not

intend him to be looked upon from the outset as a madman. The act of abdicating sovereign power was never yet, in the world's history, achieved with impunity, since men invested with supreme authority are certain to do, or be suspected of doing, things for which, when they have thrown off, like Prospero, their magic robes, they are sure to be called to account in some way or another. Even Lucius Sylla, the boldest of usurpers and the most reckless of abdicators, might have bewailed his generosity had not an early death placed him beyond the reach of the dagger.

Shakespeare seems to have set about his plots in haste and to have been impatient of the labour of inventing an artificial plan, and still more so of following it strictly. As a rule he took the bases of his plays from some other writer in verse or prose and steadily adhered to them, narrating the events as they were related by his originals, bringing out the characters into prominent relief, imagining a peculiar idiosyncrasy for each, and putting into their mouths suitable speeches. No doubt he took care to find good subjects—I mean generally—for several of the subjects he chose are bad and barren of incidents; or if incidents abound, they are so unnatural that, with the utmost force of his genius, he can make nothing of them. This is the case with 'Cymbeline,' 'Troilus and Cressida,' 'Pericles, Prince of Tyre,' 'Titus Andronicus,' 'Love's Labour's Lost,' 'Two Gentlemen of Verona,' 'Comedy of Errors,' and some others. As to probability, he evidently cared little or nothing about it, since he set it at naught whenever it suited his purpose, instead of it sometimes substituting splendid impossibilities—in this conforming to the advice of Aristotle, who tells us that an impossibility that is probable is better than a possible thing

which is improbable. An old Greek poet being reproached with relating things which were not likely to have occurred, replied 'In great length of time it is probable that very improbable things should happen.' Shakespeare appears to have taken this for his creed, and therefore set about his dramatic creations with little respect for probability. In most of his plays there is no plot at all, but instead a number of incidents and events thrown arbitrarily together, arranged without art, and resulting in a catastrophe which need not have followed from anything that had taken place. Yet we are in most cases interested by the story—that is, by the manner in which things often contrary to Nature are told. Sometimes, as in 'The Winter's Tale,' a series of episodic scenes of rare beauty is introduced in the midst of events and circumstances distinguished chiefly for their absurdity. The events of this play, stripped of their gorgeous clothing and exhibited naked to the mind, are in fact so preposterous that they only excite commiseration for the writer who could discredit his genius by setting them forth. It may, however, be inferred that in this play as in many others Shakespeare designed to demonstrate the folly by which the rulers of mankind are too often actuated, for Leontes and Polixenes are so destitute of commonsense that their equals could hardly be found out of Bedlam. Yet in relating the actions of those individuals, so worthless in themselves, Shakespeare often contrived to touch the heart and throw open the sources of pity. Hermione, whom Shakespeare brings from Russia to Sicily, where she appears native and to the manner born, manages by her hoydenish behaviour to inspire her foolish husband with jealousy, so that he regards her as an adulteress and causes her to be tried for her life.

Acquitted through the instrumentality of the oracle at Delphi, which is made contemporaneous with Julio Romano, she is nevertheless thrown into prison, where she is delivered of a daughter, which Leontes orders to be exposed. Strange events now spring up thicker and faster: Leontes commands one of his courtiers to sail to Bohemia, that is to the kingdom of Polixenes—the fact that it was an inland country not being thought of any consequence. To shield the poet from the charge of not being correct in his geography, Pope, in his edition, substitutes Bithynia for Bohemia. But the thick and thin Shakespeareans will have none of his Bithynia, and return indignantly to the original Bohemia. On the coast of Bohemia, therefore, the King's daughter is cast, and there a bear devours the courtier who exposes her, but abstains from making a mouthful of the child, upon the principle advocated by Falstaff, that a lion will not touch the true prince. Giving the infant time to grow up to be a woman, we return to Sicily, where the Queen is supposed to die, and to be shifted off with so little ceremony that no one knows what becomes of her body, royal funerals there being of so little account that they were attended by no one, that no undertaker was employed to make a coffin, and no mourning establishment to supply a shroud. Leontes, being delivered from his adulterous Queen, as he would have it, concerns himself no more about the matter, and refuses to see her put decently into the earth. This behaviour the reader will, I think, allow to be improbable, yet it is trifling compared with what follows. Hermione's baby—having been picked up by a shepherd, who, while he gives it to his wife to nurse, prudently preserves the rich garments in which it had

been thrown into the jungle—receives the name of Perdita, is brought up by the shepherdess, and becomes the prettiest lass in all the countryside. But princes and princesses are attracted to each other like iron and the loadstone. The son of Polixenes, with the romantic name of Florizel, finds out Perdita and falls in love with her, while she, with all the beauties and graces of a princess, casts a spell over her lover, who resolves in spite of father and friends to make her his queen. For the present, however, he considers it judicious to escape from his father's anger, and now it turns out that the poet has provided against this contingency, for a Sicilian nobleman who had escaped from Sicily with Polixenes, being in his old age desirous of returning home, counsels Florizel to make for that quarter, and to frame a story after the manner of Odysseus to account for his appearance there with his bride. While events are shaping themselves into something like order in the palace of Leontes, Polixenes and the fugitive Sicilian nobleman rush in, and matters are soon adjusted to the satisfaction of all parties. But then comes the crowning event. Paulina, widow of the courtier who had been eaten by the bear, invites Leontes and his guests to view a splendid statue which she had just received from Italy; they accept the invitation and repair to the house, enter the gallery, a curtain is withdrawn, and Hermione as a marble statue stands before them. Shakespeare's *Julio Romano* had anticipated Gibson, for, as Paulina assures us, he had painted his statue and the colours were not even then dry. However, Leontes, who no longer regarded his helpmate as an adulteress, being strongly desirous of touching her body, is withheld by Paulina till at length the eyes move, the bosom heaves with breath,

and the image of the dead queen descends from its pedestal, to the no small surprise, as we may imagine, of all present. Such is one of Shakespeare's stories told plainly but faithfully. Hermione during sixteen years' seclusion had grown wrinkled, though her age need not have been above forty, but women did grow old very soon in Shakespeare's time, and so we pass over the wrinkles.

'As You Like It' is, upon the whole, a very charming play, many of the incidents are pretty, while the descriptions and reflections are often of the rarest beauty; but neither Nature nor probability has the least share in the construction of the plot, in the development of the story, in the invention of the characters, or in the *dénouement*. A good father, we know, has often bad sons as well as good ones; but if the good are supposed to be so because they are his sons, what makes the bad ones bad? Shakespeare entangles himself with this problem at the very outset of 'As You Like It.' Orlando, the youngest son, possesses all the graces of person, all the chivalrous accomplishments, all the virtues of his dead father, Sir Rowland de Boys, while his eldest brother Oliver is cold-blooded, cruel, and fiendishly malignant. It is in some part of France these individuals are found, and in the dominions of a Duke who, having been expelled from the dukedom by his brother, has taken to the bush, and dwells with a number of virtuous courtiers in the Forest of Arden. These Dukes, good and bad, have a daughter apiece—one Rosalind, the other Celia, the former belonging to the banished Duke, the latter to the usurper. Why Rosalind did not accompany her father is not explained; though if she had the choice, and preferred her cousin to her father, we are constrained

to think somewhat meanly of her. Just as the play opens she falls in love with Orlando for his strength in wrestling, and loses her uncle's favour because the people praise her more than Celia. She is therefore ordered upon pain of death not to be found in the Duke's dominions after the expiration of two days. Celia, being fond of her, resolves to be her companion. In the night they fly together, and by way of fitting themselves with a suitable companion, persuade her highness's fool, Touchstone, to elope with them. Rosalind, being the taller, disguises herself as a man, while Celia preserves her petticoats. By good luck they find their way to the Forest of Arden, whither Orlando and a faithful servant also betake themselves. Here then in the forest, Duke, ladies, gentlemen, live in masquerade; Rosalind and her cousin purchase a cottage, and dwell among the rustics; Orlando joins the Duke's followers, and roams about the wood at his pleasure. Of course he falls in with the disguised Rosalind, which leads to a mock courtship between the two young men as they appear to each other, which, to speak plainly, is disgusting, for Orlando kisses the youth as if he were a girl. While this fooling is in progress, the two bad brothers come upon the scene; Oliver by the machinery of a dragon, a lion, and a palm-tree, is transformed into a saint, while the usurping and cruel Duke, meeting with a hermit, throws off his wickedness as easily as he might his cloak, and betakes himself to a monastery. Rosalind then doffs her male costume and is married to Orlando; and Celia, falling in love with 'The Deformed Transformed,' becomes the wife of Oliver. Such is the story of 'As You Like It,' which will, I think, be confessed to have as little resemblance to nature or probability as any tale in the 'Arabian Nights'; and yet

the magic of Shakespeare's hand has, out of these unpromising materials, fabricated one of the most charming of his plays.

The comedy, as it is called, of 'Much Ado about Nothing' is made up of preposterous incidents, and the lamest of all stories, and yet the result, according to some critics, is the most splendid comedy in our language. Let us examine the materials. The natural brother of a prince, having risen in rebellion, is defeated, taken prisoner, and brought to Messina by his captor Pedro, who is accompanied by several officers, among whom are Claudio and Benedick. They are welcomed by the governor of the city, Leonato, and received into his house as guests. Was Claudio a stranger to Leonato or not? Shakespeare has omitted to settle that point, for now Claudio is not a stranger and now he is: at one time saying that he had loved Leonato's daughter Hero before going to the wars, at another time inquiring of the prince whether Leonato, who must therefore have been a complete stranger to him, had or had not a son to inherit his wealth to the prejudice of Hero, whom therefore he intends to woo for her possessions, not for her beauty. Learning that Hero would be her father's sole heir, it is arranged that the prince shall woo her for the fortune-hunter, which he does successfully, so that marriage is determined on and the day fixed. The prince's half-brother, a sort of would-be Iago, disliking this arrangement because he hated Claudio, who had been one of his conquerors, resolves to counteract his brother's design. The plot he puts in play does as little credit to his invention as being overreached by it does to the discernment of Claudio and the prince. Don John hires one of his dependants, Borachio, to allure Hero's maid, Margaret, without

giving her any explanation, to appear by night at her mistress's window, and there, dressed in the lady's clothes, to hold converse with him. It is not said that Borachio enters the chamber, or has any amorous intrigue with Margaret. However, the Prince and Claudio, who from a distance witness the interview, jump at once to the conclusion that Hero is a voluptuous harlot. They could not have been near enough to discern the lady's countenance, or even dress, in the dark; neither, unless she shouted like Stentor, could they hear what she said. All they could surely know was that somebody spoke out of Hero's bedroom to somebody in the garden below. Thereupon the wise Claudio, with the wiser Prince, determined to disgrace Hero publicly in the church, whither she is to repair to be married to Claudio in presence of her father and friend. This is accordingly done, and Hero, broken-hearted, is supposed to die. While she is supposed to be dead, the Prince and Claudio meet Leonato and his brother, and on being provoked by the old men insult them grossly, and when immediately afterwards they meet Benedick observe they were just about to have their noses snapped off by two old men without teeth. At this stage of the proceedings, Don John's device is discovered by a foolish constable and his comrades, who overhear the villain, Borachio, relating to another rascal what he had done, upon which Claudio becomes romantic, and repairs to Hero's supposed tomb in a church, where he chants a hymn to Diana. This done, Hero is brought forward as a cousin supposed to be very like her, and the penitent fortune-hunter marries the heiress, while, by way of supplement, Benedick also finds a wife in Beatrice, who, though

not the heroine, figures most prominently throughout the story. To what extent is probability consulted in this strange narrative, and is nature treated with any greater respect? The play, nevertheless, tells upon the stage, chiefly through the vivacity of the dialogue and the wit of Beatrice, who, for her own good, is allured into a marriage with Benedick by an artifice so poor that it would hardly be thought respectable in a nursery tale.

Another comedy which in many respects is clever and lively is 'Twelfth Night,' in which, however, there is scarcely one natural character, or any event that comes under the head of probable. Shakespeare loves to play with two individuals cast in the same mould, so that the one may often be mistaken for the other. In 'The Comedy of Errors,' if the play be his, he has pushed this fancy to the utmost verge of absurdity, so that when a number of barren spectators laugh, it is doubtful whether they laugh with him or at him. The story of 'Twelfth Night' is this: A brother and sister wrecked on the coast of Illyria make for the capital, not together, for each imagines the other to be drowned, but with two captains, whose characters were meant to figure in the Golden Age or in More's 'Utopia.' The girl, conscious of her beauty, and of the dangers to which it might expose her, disguises herself in the habit of a youth by the aid of her sea-faring friend, and on reaching the capital finds immediate service as a eunuch under the Duke. This prince is desperately in love with a fantastic lady, who has vowed to perform during seven years all sorts of antics for the loss of a brother, and, as part of her design, declines the Duke's love, and he sends his eunuch page to plead his cause. Women usually look

small in men's clothes, and this one, Viola, is so undersized that she is called a boy ; still, when she is seen by Olivia, the object of the Duke's passion, she inspires her with a fondness so extravagant, that she forgets her dead brother at once, and throws herself at the head of the Duke's representative. Olivia has a drunken uncle, as great a knave as he is a sot, who fills his pockets by swindling one whom he calls his friend.

Is it not a proof of our dullness, that we can witness the same buffoonery and listen to the same jokes two or three hundred times, without strangling ourselves or cutting our throats through sheer *ennui* ? We laugh to-day at what we laughed at yesterday. It becomes indeed a habit of the mind, seeing we are as much in want of amusement one day as another. Lamb thought, not unnaturally, considering the materials of contemporary literature, that it was a sort of profanation to put Shakespeare's dramas upon the stage—meaning, I suppose, the best of them, for there are others which would be kept off by their intrinsic dullness. Who in fact could sit out the dreary platitudes of 'Cymbeline,' of 'Troilus and Cressida,' or of any one of the historical plays ? And where are the actors and actresses who could properly perform 'Romeo and Juliet,' or 'Macbeth,' or 'Lear,' or 'Hamlet,' or 'Othello' ?

It has been remarked by numerous writers that the age of Shakespeare was the age of the drama, not that he made it, but that he found it so. No other form of composition was so popular as the drama, the theatres were constantly crowded, and several companies of actors traversed the country, playing in every considerable town, where they appear to have almost invariably found a welcome. In our own day, the

drama may almost be said to be defunct—killed, as some fancy, by the novel—though in point of fact, every age has its favourite forms of composition, which take their rise in peculiar modifications of manners, which they help to confirm or alter, though in a degree scarcely appreciable. The history of manners, if it could be written, would be the most interesting of all histories, because manners are the outward and visible signs of the thoughts, opinions, feelings, and character of the nation. No man who opposes himself to the current of national prejudices can be popular; he must flatter, while he seems to censure them—which Shakespeare did, conforming in appearance at least to all the whims and extravagances of the hour. The question, however, is, what causes the changes we observe in the manners of nations, and why will they adore at one time what they loathe at another? It is easy to say that it is in obedience to a law of human nature; but what is that law? Shakespeare alluded to the fact, but without explaining the cause :

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin
That all with one consent praise new-born gawds
Though they are made and moulded of things past
And give to dust that is a little gilt
More laud than gilt o'er-dusted.

